

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Erica Smith

Shohreh Davoodi: Holy shit, everyone. Today, I'm talking to Erica Smith who is a sexuality educator with almost two decades of experience in the field.

For most of her career, she has worked with young women and queer and trans youth in the juvenile justice system.

Her current focus is helping parents understand their LGBTQ+ children and helping folks unlearn the harmful lessons of purity culture.

Erica and I talked about pervasive myths about sex, the construct of virginity, purity culture and how to heal from it, what good sexual health entails, and a whole lot more.

To access the show notes for this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/5. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/5. I'm really excited to share this episode with you, so let's go talk about sex.

[music plays]

Shohreh: Hey y'all. Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor and certified personal trainer. I help people improve their relationships with exercise, food and their bodies so they can ditch diet culture for good and do what feels right for them.

Through this podcast, I want to give you the tools to redefine what health and wellness mean to you by exposing myths and misconceptions, delving into all the areas of health that often get ignored, and reminding you that health and wellness are not moral obligations. Are you ready? Let's fuck some shit up.

Shohreh: Hello Erica. How are you doing today?

Erica Smith: Hi. I'm doing really great. Thank you for asking.

Shohreh: Awesome. I am so excited to have you on the podcast. You were one of the very first people that I thought of to invite on the podcast.

Erica: Oh, wow. I'm very honored by that.

Oh yeah. I mean, I just feel like sexual health is one of those areas of health that we ignore so often as a culture and that we just don't really think about it being an important aspect of health.

Erica: Yes.

Shohreh: I've learned so much just from your Instagram. I was like, "Oh, man. You've got to be on the podcast. You have to share this wisdom."

Erica: Well, thank you.

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- Shohreh:** Of course. So I know you've been in the sex education for you for nearly 20 years, which is a long time.
- Erica:** I know. And it makes me sound much older than I am,-
- Shohreh:** [laughs]
- Erica:** -but I really did start, like-- I started when I was in college still.
- Shohreh:** Yeah. So can you tell me about your background, like, how you came to do this work and maybe what attracted you to sex education in the first place?
- Erica:** Sure. So when I was young, like, high school age, all I knew was that I wanted to major in women's studies in college. There was nothing else that vaguely interested me, maybe like psychology or mental health, but everything was sort of leading me to help out women in particular.
- And keep in mind, this was, like, in the 90s, so this was like when things were very binary language. It was called "women's studies". It wasn't called "gender studies" back then. So that's why I'm saying that.
- So I majored in women's studies in college, and I found the classes that absolutely peaked my interest more than any were the classes that had to do with health and wellness. Specifically, sexual health.
- So I took some classes that were cross-listed with, like, nursing and biobehavioral health. And I learned a lot of things about healthcare inequality.
- And I remember one thing in particular that I learned back then was about birth control methods being tested on the most vulnerable populations, and black women being lied to about sterilization and just learning all these things I was just floored by. So that is the kind of stuff that first really got me interested in working in sexual health.
- I did a lot of events in college with my friends. We were feminist activists. We put on a lot of events on campus that had to do with sex and sexual health.
- And then my first job out of college was at an abortion clinic that also did routine sexual health care. So there was also a like STI testing, paps, breast exams, things like that.
- So I worked as a counselor there talking to women and people who were going to have abortions and sort of guiding them through that process, even handholding through the procedures. And I did that for I guess a year or so.
- And then, I began working with young people, specifically teenagers who were in the juvenile justice system. Working with them to prevent

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unwanted sexual health outcomes. So that would be if they were interested in preventing pregnancy, we would talk about that. We talked a lot about STIs because it was a HIV prevention mostly. But that ended up being a long part of my career. So for almost 17 years, I worked specifically with youth in juvenile justice, also targeting LGBTQ youth in the juvenile justice system and working with them around issues of sexual health.

Shohreh: What was it that kept you working with youth in the juvenile justice system? Like, what did you enjoy about it?

Erica: They're the best people I've ever met. Well, for one, I was working for a really great organization that I'm still involved with. A very well-known children's hospital had developed this program to work with youth in detention.

And I loved the folks I worked with, but more importantly, just absolutely loved working with teenagers. These are teenagers who had experienced some of the harshest and most traumatic things in life.

I know when a lot of folks hear "kids in juvenile detention", they think, "Oh. These are a bunch of bad kids." But they are kids who were abused and neglected, who had very little family support, who had a lot of collective trauma, intergenerational trauma, community trauma. And now, they're like 13/14 and trying to survive.

So they, in my experience, have been some of the most good, fascinating, smart, resilient, and just amazing people. And that is really why I did the work for so long.

It's never being boring. No day was ever the same. I really found a lot of value in having these really intensive conversations with young people about sexuality and their sexual health and, you know, helping them come to realizations that they might not have had before and helping them access resources.

Shohreh: That is seriously so cool and such an interesting way to get your start in this work.

You've recently started working for yourself. Is that right?

Erica: I have. I decided that after 17 years, I was ready to pass the torch onto somebody else and kind of go out on my own, so that's what I've been doing for only about a month or two. Yeah. It's very recent.

The bulk of my work-- which is to say the bulk of my income because you know how it is when you work for yourself.

Shohreh: Yep.

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Erica: [laughs] So I have been working with private clients doing sexuality education consulting coaching. And a lot of those clients come from my Instagram following.

In addition to that, I do still have a lot of ties to-- I'm in Philadelphia. So I've been working in the Philadelphia public health and LGBT community for a long time. So I have very strong ties here.

So I still do work with different agencies and organizations. A lot of that has to do with LGBTQ competency training.

So just today, I was writing a training that I'm going to give on Friday to folks that work in the field of sex trafficking with youths. They've needed some LGBT competency in their work, so that's a presentation I'll be giving this week.

I am writing some curriculums to help healthcare providers understand the needs of LGBTQ people. So I'm doing that stuff. Yeah.

I feel like it's cool that I get to like pick and choose what I want to spend my time on, and so far, it's been a variety of things.

Shohreh: And for those of you listening, you're going to listen to this podcast. You're going to have a bunch of epiphanies. And when you have all these questions, now you know that you can go to Erica, and you can hire her and consult with her to get some help with all of your sexuality questions.

Erica: Yes, absolutely.

Shohreh: So I feel like I want to start with myths with you.

Erica: Oh, yeah.

Shohreh: Because I am sure, in the field of sexuality and sexual health, that there are just so many pervasive myths that you, as a sex educator, hear constantly and are probably just tired of hearing at this point.

So if you want to share some of your-- I'm going to say- quote, unquote- favorites that you would like to set the record straight on in this podcast.

Erica: Sure. That's such a great question. I have collected many over the years. I think some of them might be specific to youth in Philadelphia. I don't know if these are things that are being said the world over, so I will preface with that that most of these myths have been ones that I've heard from young people over the course of the last how many years.

Shohreh: The rest of us are too old to understand any of them.

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Erica: [laughs] No. I don't know though because, you know, if I've been working with young people since, like, 2003, they're not young anymore. So they might still be myths that are being carried on by, like, young adults and 30-somethings.

Shohreh: That is a good point.

Erica: [laughs]

Shohreh: All right, what's your first one?

Erica: Okay. The first one is that a person with a vagina can have sex and sort of wear their vagina out, and that means change the shape of it, change the tightness of it. One of the ways that the kids that I've worked with will describe this is a woman having "no walls", walls being like vaginal walls. That's kind of a term that, to them, means that her pussy is loose, and that's because she's a slut.

There are so many problems with this one. And the way I usually break it down when I'm giving young people information is, "Okay. So what do you think vaginas are made of?" You know, they're not silly putty. They're not Play-Doh. It is muscle. It is strong. It is elastic. And I tell them that, unless something is inside the vagina, it's closed in on itself. The only reason it's ever open is if there's something inside of it's like a finger, a toy, a penis, a tampon. And so the rest of the time, you know, it doesn't just, like, hang open.

And would you say this about a lady that's had sex with her husband and only her husband every day for 20 years? Would you say that about her vagina? And they're usually like, "Oh." Like, they don't even think about that. It's more like it applies to the girl that has multiple partners.

Shohreh: Yeah. And that's always the way that I heard it too growing up. It's, like, you would describe somebody as loose because she was having sex with a lot of different people, but the implication was that her vagina was literally larger than other people's, and it was never going to go back to normal.

Erica: Exactly. And another sort of, I guess, tangent of that myth is that you could tell if your partner, like your female partner, your partner with a vagina, you could tell that she cheated on you by the way their vagina feels inside.

So I have had kids argue with me about this. They're like, "No. I know it felt different because she was with another guy." And, like, they seem to get the idea that vaginas can sort of take the shape of the penises that have been inside them.

I've actually heard a kid say, "The first person that you have sex with kind of imprints on your vagina." [laughs]

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- Shohreh:** Oh. They really think they have so much power than they do. [laughs]
- Erica:** I know. Yeah. So that's why it's such an interesting-- Like, to pick it apart and see what the roots of it are. It's like, you know, penises are this powerful, mighty thing, and vaginas are very elastic, but also the status of your vagina determines sort of your worth as a person. And I'll ask them, "Okay. So if someone with a penis has a lot of sex, does his penis shrink? Does it get smaller? Does it just keep getting skinnier and skinnier?" And they're like, "What? No. That's ridiculous." And I'm like, "So, so is the vagina thing." They're not black holes.
- [laughs]
- Erica:** They're not these blobs of air.
- Shohreh:** And thank goodness for that.
- Erica:** Yeah. Even folks that have multiple children, they are going to experience some changes in elasticity. They're going to experience maybe some pelvic floor issues, but there's no such thing as having no walls.
- Shohreh:** I feel like that was very important to set straight.
- Erica:** [laughs]
- Shohreh:** Thank you. Thank you for that.
- Erica:** Yes. Sure.
- Shohreh:** Alright. What else do you got on the myth department?
- Erica:** Okay. So this is another one that I think a lot of people believe is that being diagnosed with HIV is considered-- like, that it is a death sentence. This has changed over the decades. We are very lucky nowadays in that the ways that we can treat and prevent HIV are pretty wonderful. But it is still such a scary thing for people.
- So a lot of folks think, "If you get HIV, you're just going to die." Doctors will tell you that it is more difficult to manage diabetes day-by-day than it is to manage HIV.
- Shohreh:** Hmm. Interesting.
- Erica:** Yeah. It's a managed, chronic condition that you can take one pill a day for, typically, and live a very healthy, long life. I think a lot of folks also don't realize that if you are taking your HIV meds and your viral load is zero, meaning your viral load is undetectable, you cannot pass HIV to another person. It's impossible to do.

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So that means that there are people who live with HIV that cannot transmit the virus to other people. We also have really great HIV prevention medication now, PrEP which stands for Pre-exposure prophylaxis. And that is something that you can take one pill a day to prevent HIV if you think that you are at high risk for it. Like, if your partner is positive or you have, you know, different partners whose health statuses you don't know. Yeah, just the overall idea that HIV is still kind of a untreatable death sentence for people when it's really not.

Folks often think that if you have sex with somebody with HIV, you just automatically have it. Like, there's 100 percent chance that you are going to acquire HIV when that is not true at all, and there are a lot of different factors that play into whether or not a person becomes HIV-positive. And that has to do with the health of the person who has HIV, how much viral load is in their body and it also has to do with the health of the person who doesn't have it. Are you someone who's immunocompromised already? Are you struggling with other illnesses? Do you have inflammation, like, in your genital area? Are you taking care of your body in other ways?

And then also, the type of sex you have, the exposures. There are certain ways you can have sex that put you at higher risk for HIV, and that would include receiving penetration and having someone cum inside of you, and it also has to be something that's done repeatedly over time.

So the chances of just getting HIV because you had sex with one person one time are not guaranteed. They are not 100 percent. And that's something that I do think a lot of people don't understand, because it's not common knowledge. It's not something we talk about.

Shohreh: Awesome. All right. I think we have time for, let's say, one more myth. So if there's something that's really speaking to you.

Erica: Let me think about this one. This is a really silly one.

Shohreh: Perfect.

Erica: Okay. So the word is that if you have a lot of anal sex, it'll make your butt bigger, like fatter, like juicier butt.

Shohreh: This sounds like a young people thing.

[laughs]

Erica: I hope it's a young people thing. The funny thing is, I have had kids, like, argue with me, and they're like "No. I swear. That's how so and so's butt got big. That's how my cousin's butt got big." And I have to just sort of explain, "This is how our bodies work. And if your muscles

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and fat get bigger, it's not because you had anal penetration." You know what I mean?

But yeah. I also think that might be something that is a line that girls are given. Like, you know, people want a bigger butt now. It's, like, a more common-- It's one of our current beauty standards.

So "if you want a bigger butt, you should probably have anal sex with me" is what I am thinking that people are saying.

Shohreh: That makes a lot of sense that this was, like, the current generation's way to coerce girls to have anal sex whereas it used to be that anal sex doesn't count.

Erica: Oh my gosh. Yeah.

Shohreh: When I was growing up, I heard that all the time.

Erica: Yeah. Which is probably a good lead-in to any discussion of purity culture, because that's still a pretty commonly held belief by some folks.

Shohreh: Yes. I want to talk all things purity culture, in particular because I grew up very much in purity culture. I had two parents who were very religious and learned all kinds of weird stuff about sex or really about not having sex when I was growing up. I was told, like, "Sex is not something that we do unless we are married" and it's gross, and I need to be careful what I am wearing.

Like, I was very much steeped in that growing up. And I also grew up in Texas where, you know, we have abstinence-only sex education. So not the world's best sexual learning in my teenage years.

And so I know you do a lot of work around purity culture. So, can you first start by explaining what purity culture is?

Erica: Yes. I have really come to understand it as a broad kind of concept, because there are different extremes of purity culture.

So in general, it means being raised with ideas and values that sex is shameful, bad, and dirty. And that can take many forms. That can just mean that you didn't have sex education and that people didn't really talk about sex with you as a young person. That is a version of purity culture.

But then there are more purposeful versions where folks are taught by church groups or youth groups or their families or their clergy that, basically, premarital sex in any form is absolutely forbidden. Some even go to the extremes of, like, any physical contact before marriage is forbidden.

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There are programs that teach that if-- It's always really focused on girls, and it's always very binary in gender, of course. But they'll actually teach things like, "You have to save yourself for your husband. Your value lies with your purity. You want to present your husband a one hundred percent virginal person on your wedding day. That is your gift to him. If you don't do this, you are a chewed-up piece of gum. You are a, you know, spit-on piece of paper."

Like, there are all these different metaphors that are used as teaching tools to shame girls and convince them that if you do anything sexual before you meet your husband, that you will spend forever with, that you are dirty.

And so, yeah. That's purity culture in a nutshell. It's insidious, and it can really be everything from just not talking about sex because we're uncomfortable with it because it feels weird to actually telling our kids, "You will go to hell and be used up if you have sex."

Shohreh: Your mentioning of the teaching tools actually brings me back because when I was in high school and I had that abstinence-only education, we did this ridiculous exercise where we had to create a construction paper heart.

And we walked around the room, and you would tear off pieces of it, and you would give them to people in the room.

And then we came back together in a group. And they were like, "Do you know what you just did? Every time you have sex with somebody outside of your marriage, you're giving away a piece of your heart you're never going to get back."

Erica: Wow.

Shohreh: How fucked up to tell ninth-graders that.

Erica: Yeah. And I'm assuming that, at the end, you're the paper heart that looks all ripped apart and that is you, the damaged item.

Shohreh: Yeah. That's supposed to be you. This was in public school, mind you.

Erica: Oh, yes. So that's extra bad. But it doesn't surprise me. One of the things that inspired me to create this is-- I was not raised in purity culture. I did not come from a religious background or a family that carries any of these beliefs. But I remember abstinence-only education becoming a huge part of the George W. Bush platform.

So when he was president of the United States from, gosh, that was '01 to '08 or 2000 to '08, I guess. So he earmarked billions of dollars to abstinence-only education which funded things like that program you went through, which funded church groups and youth groups who did all those activities telling us we were chewed-up pieces of gum.

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And multiple, large-scale studies have shown that abstinence-only education doesn't work. It doesn't provide people with the tools they need, and so there's, like, scientific proof that it is not useful, yet the government just continued to spend lots of money on it. That is, the numbers of how much money the government was spending on it were brought down during the Obama years, but they're going back up again now.

So despite all of this evidence that abstinence-only is harmful and it is not good to deny people comprehensive sex education, it's still something we're doing here.

Shohreh: It's always amazed me how the goals of abstinence-only education are the exact opposite of what you get with abstinence-only education.

Like, it doesn't actually stop anybody from having sex, or getting pregnant, or getting STIs. Like, it actually makes everything worse because nobody has any information that they need to make good decisions.

Erica: Yes. And then, you know, a lot of the teaching, especially if the teaching is from a sort of evangelical perspective, the teaching is that, once you do enter into marriage with your heterosexual partner, then you will be a good wife who sexually pleases your husband. And it is your duty to do that. And it is not your right to tell him "no", that you're there to please him.

And there are women who marry and have no idea what's going on. They have no fucking idea what to do, what does it mean to be 100 percent pure and then a switch is supposed to flip, and you know how to please your husband.

That is just the breeding ground for so much shame, confusion, trauma, marital dysfunction, among other things.

Shohreh: In what ways have you seen growing up in purity culture affect the health and well-being of people as adults? And I'm curious, too, if you've seen a difference between people who identify as men for instance versus people who identify as women.

Erica: Oh, yeah. So one of the first things I've done as a self-employed person is to run a program called "Purity Culture Dropout" where I worked intensively with folks for one or two months. At this point, I still have some of the clients from the original program still working with me.

So every single person that signed up was a woman. I didn't even have any inquiries from men. I don't know. I think, you know, I have a following on Instagram that leans heavily towards women, but I did not have anyone in my program that was not a cisgender woman. I will say that, in the conversations I had with my clients, I learned that a lot of

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their partners, their male partners, had grown up in purity culture, and it had damaged them too. They are not the people that are reaching out to me, but the things that I have learned from my female, cis clients about their cis-male partners is that a lot of their partners feel shame with their sexual desire because one of the things that boys raised in purity culture are taught is that your sexual desires are really bad and you have to hide them at all times and tamp them down at all times, and that you are basically uncontrollable.

It's sort of like, you know, boys learn that this is just part of your lot of being a man is that you want to have sex, and you just can't do that until you're married.

So a lot of the men experience deep shame around their sexual desires. They experience shame around masturbation, a lot of hiding that they masturbate or shame around the use of pornography, which doesn't help anybody.

A lot of the women I talk to are in long-term relationships with men who also can't communicate with them well about sex. So that ends up being an issue for both partners in the marriage is that no one ever taught them that you can talk to your partner about what feels good to you. No one ever taught them how to ask your partner for what you want, to learn your own body, to communicate your own desires.

So that's something that definitely affects folks of all genders raised in purity culture. And then when two of them partner together, it just kind of-- A lot of the stuff really comes out because they've never really been told that they can forge a mutually pleasurable sexual relationship that involves talking to each other.

Shohreh: Especially with two people, that feels like a recipe for disaster-

Erica: Yeah.

Shohreh: -when it comes to sex which is something that I think really requires a lot of communication and openness. That's something that I had struggled with too, having grown up in purity culture and learning that, as a woman, my job was to please men, essentially.

And so like, what I want doesn't matter. I shouldn't talk about it. And I should just, I guess, play into whatever it is that he wants. Like, there were many years where I was like, "Oh, yeah. I'll just go along with whatever he wants, and I'll do whatever I think I'm supposed to do." And that definitely causes problems in relationships.

Erica: Yeah. I have encountered many women who were told that they should not have sex. They should not have sexual pleasure, but in wanting to still please men and keep them interested, would just give men oral sex.

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So it's like it didn't count to them because it wasn't penis-in-vagina sex, but they wanted to still be pleasing a man, still be kind of keeping a guy's interest. And so sort of just learned to just give men oral sex as the way they got by in navigating their relationships.

Shohreh: 100 percent, that was me in high school. Like, I drew the line of, like, "Okay. I'm not going to have penis-in-vagina sex, but like, oral sex is fine and is enough to, like, keep him interested." And, of course, at the time, like, this was not being reciprocated.

Erica: I was just going to say.

[laughs]

Erica: Yep. That's not part of it.

Shohreh: Exactly. Like, I didn't get anything out of it, but that's how you keep them around and interested. And I was, like-- Once I went to college, I was like, "Okay, now I can go over the line."

But, like, it felt very important to me at that time of like, "Okay. We can only go up to here," which of course, now, I think of sex and define it so differently. And actually, it's a great question for you as well which is how do you define sex, generally?

Erica: That is such a great question. And it is-- I love that question because it just leaves so much room for everyone to have their own interpretation.

So to me, it is like intimate contact that involves the genitals of at least one of the people involved. It does not have to involve the penis. So if you take penis out of the equation, it, like, opens up this whole possibility of oh, like, women can count their female sexual partners which is something I have really also observed in the young people I work with is sometimes the girls don't count sex with other girls as actually sex, which is a whole interesting thing.

But yeah. I think, for me, it's just intimate, pleasurable contact between people where someone's genitals are involved.

I think that's-- Am I missing anything there? But you could go on forever about what that means for different people, but I think queer sex-- And I am a queer person, so that does open up automatically my definition of sex more broader than maybe somebody that just considered themselves a heterosexual person.

Shohreh: For sure. And I think your point about there's different ways to define this stands, too, because for some people, they might not even include the part about involving the genitals, right? Maybe for some people, just kissing for them is enough that they would define it as sex. So I do think it's definitely up to the interpretation of the individual, but that depending on your experiences, maybe you define it more narrowly.

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Because certainly, myself as a queer person as well, I think the way that I think about what sex is very different from someone who is heterosexual.

Erica: Absolutely. If we consider oral sex "sex", which I personally do, that you know can sort of open up people's minds to be like, "Oh. Then I've actually had a lot more sexual partners than I thought I had" which is not a big deal. I'm not using a number as a measure of any one's worth. But sort of, "Did you expand your mind about what activities actually count as sex?" is really, like, a whole new way of thinking about it.

Shohreh: I think that's another aspect of purity culture too is this emphasis on having the least amount of sexual partners possible. But really, when you think about it, like, a number means absolutely nothing.

Erica: No. It means nothing. And, you know, men are , they are not taught in the same way to keep-- They're never taught that you have to be 100 percent pure for your wife, like, in the way that girls are taught that they're used, chewed up pieces of gum and all that.

And also, like, just the language we're using in talking about this makes it very clear that purity cultural 100 percent erases people that are queer or not cisgender.

So everything is boys and girls and the relationships that are had between boys and girls.

So if you are a queer person or you are a trans person, you grew up with only this messaging, it can have devastating consequences because you're learning all of these problematic things, but on top of that's the extra layer that you're kind of learning that you don't even exist in this world.

Shohreh: And that's not cool. Not cool that's all. God damn you, purity culture.

Erica: [laughs] You actually made me think of something else I wanted to bring up which was, there's such a variation in the, you know-- You said that you wouldn't cross a certain line. Like, you would have oral sex, but you wouldn't do X, Y, Z. One of the things that comes up a lot is that nobody has the same idea of what the line is, and nobody is encouraged to talk about it. So people don't really ask their peers these questions.

And if you say to somebody, "What's your idea of being pure until marriage?" You will get a gigantic variety of responses.

For some people, that was, "You could kiss but nothing else," or, "You could kiss and do hand jobs but nothing else," or, "You can have oral sex, but not penis-in-vagina sex."

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Some people said it's abstaining from even kissing until you're engaged. Some people said it was okay to kiss, but you had to stand up while doing it. You could never be lying down together.

So what is the line? There is no definitive thing that people learn or adhere to that sort of makes a definition of purity. It's like there's a constantly moving target.

Shohreh: I want to come back to purity culture, but I'm going to do a quick detour because of what you just said.

So this reminds me of one of my ex-boyfriends. The girlfriend that he had before me-- This was when they were in high school. He had mentioned to me, "Oh. Well, we had anal sex once because she didn't want to lose her virginity."

And this just made me think about, like, can we please talk about virginity and the ridiculous construct that it is?

Erica: Yeah. What does virginity even mean? If you ask folks, they're probably gonna say it's the state of being you are before a penis goes in a vagina. Why?

Like, if you just start right there, it's a very patriarchal concept. It's something that means your first sexual experience with somebody with a penis, of course in this context, a male, means that you are changed as a person. It just doesn't mean anything.

This goes back to "what's your definition of sex?" So if your definition of sex is much more expansive than "penis-in-vagina", then what is virginity?

There are some people that will say, "Well, if you have a vagina, it's when the hymen is broken." What does that mean?

There is a-- Most people are born with a, like, thin membrane over their vaginal opening, but that can break any time in your life. That can break when you are doing gymnastics, or riding a bike, or masturbating, or using tampons.

Like, a broken hymen is not an indication of virginity or not-virginity. And there are cultures where they will, like, actually look to see if a woman's hymen is broken.

There's no way that that means anything. All our bodies are different. And the hymen can break for a variety of reasons, even if we have one in the first place.

Yeah. So I don't think virginity is-- it really doesn't mean anything.

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One of my Purity Culture Dropout clients had a realization recently that she was like, "What if I start thinking of my virginity as my first sexual experience with myself?"

And that was good, but her first sexual experience with another person wasn't so great. But she found a lot of power if she started thinking about her first sexual experience as being her own exploration of her body.

Shohreh: I can definitely see how that would be more powerful because that reminds me-- So for instance, like, again, if we're using penis-in-vagina sex as the marker for virginity, which I did at the time,-

Erica: Yeah, same.

Shohreh: -I- quote, unquote- lost my virginity when I was drunk. And I remember feeling at the time like, "I needed to have sex with this guy again because that would make it okay," right? That would make it not just this, like, one-time thing that we did. Because I had been told, you know, like, virginity is a really big deal.

And so I was, like, "I could save it if, like, maybe we got into a relationship and ended up caring about each other, right? And then it would be fine." That's not what happened at all. And I got over it.

But, like, these are the kinds of beliefs that come up when you put virginity on a pedestal where I was like, "I need to have sex with this guy again" who didn't treat me well at all, in order to, like, feel better about myself.

Erica: You just made two light bulbs go off for me when you were talking about that. One is I've had so many women telling me that because of their beliefs about purity culture and virginity, they've stayed with men that they would have not otherwise stayed with because they thought they had to because they "gave their virginity", like it's a present to this man.

And I had women tell me they've stayed in marriages for 10 or more years or longer that were abusive because they thought that that was it. If somebody had sex with you, you essentially belong to them. No one else is going to want you after that.

So that can be everything from the way you said you figured you had to turn it into a relationship because the virginity was so important to the extreme of staying in a long-term relationship that's unhealthy and maybe even abusive because of the belief that virginity is such a big deal and now belongs to that man.

Another thing that I feel like we would be remiss if we didn't mention is just the possibility of sexual assault. So if you throw that into the mix

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and you are sexually assaulted, what does that mean for your "virginity" if somebody penetrates you?

And also, I've had clients tell me that being raised in purity culture as survivors of childhood sexual abuse, they felt like they were being told that they were already dirty and they were already ruined.

And one of my clients in particular was like-- she actually asked the question in her youth group. Like, "Well, what if, hypothetically, somebody is sexually abused or raped?" And I guess the nun or the person teaching the class was like, "Well, it's really sad, but they're still impure."

Shohreh: Holy shit.

Erica: Yeah.

Shohreh: That is just heavy.

Erica: Yeah, exactly.

Shohreh: So for people who have been affected by this, and it seems like it's a lot of people, particularly at least in the U.S. who've been affected by purity culture, what are some steps that a person can take to begin to heal from that?

Erica: So one of the things that folks I think-- Gosh. It's a big question, and there's a lot of answers here. But the ultimate goal is for people to realize that spirituality and sexuality can coexist if they want them to.

There are some people that just are like, "You know what? I'm done with the church. I'm done with these beliefs I was raised in. I don't believe in this religion anymore." And that's definitely one avenue.

But there are other people who really want to kind of learn a new spirituality and learn a new way of relating to their deity that, like, includes healthy sexuality.

And so there are plenty of people I work with that are like, "Yeah. I'm still a Christian," for example, "but I have a different idea about what that means now and how it can include sexual pleasure and health and just very different sexual values."

One place that is really good to start is a book by Nadia Bolz-Weber called *Shameless*. Are you familiar with her work?

Shohreh: I'm not. No.

Erica: So I think you would love this book. She is a Lutheran Minister, but she is also this, like, super politically-progressive, like, cool feminist radical person.

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And she wrote an entire book called *Shameless*. I think it's like "the reclaiming of sexuality." But it's about all of the different ways that sort of, like, conservative religious people and evangelicals are harmed by purity culture. And there are different stories about the people in her ministry and how they have sort of overcome these beliefs.

And she also knows the Bible in a way that I don't because, like I said, I wasn't raised with it. And she will break down passages of the Bible and be like, "You know, they interpreted it this way, but I think this actually could mean this."

The folks I've worked with have found her book really powerful because she is somebody that is a religious person who can speak about the Bible and beliefs in a way that I as a sex educator can't. So I definitely recommend that book to people.

Shohreh: Especially for people who are still religious, I think that seems like a really good resource. And I'll be sure to link to that in the show notes as well.

Erica: Yeah, absolutely. Other things besides-- that book is a good place to start, but just learning about sexuality and exposing yourself to different viewpoints and ways that you probably weren't exposed as a younger person. There are great books about sex and sexuality like *Come As You Are* is a book about sexual response to desire by a woman named Emily Nagoski. That is something that I've been recommending to people.

Shohreh: It's an excellent book. I read that a few years ago.

Erica: Oh. You've read it?

Shohreh: Yeah. And my mind was blown. I was like, "Oh. This is amazing."

Erica: Yeah. I think in general, overcoming purity culture and getting back in touch with your sexuality is a process. And for a lot of folks, it also involves therapy because there's definitely some trauma involved for people.

And sometimes, when we're working together and we're talking about events that they remember happening in there, like, sexual development, it really kind of sheds light on, "Well, I experienced this as a trauma, and maybe I need to talk to somebody about it. And I never have."

And I would say that almost every single person that I've worked with has been like, "I'm going to tell you something I've never told another soul." And then they tell me. And it's like they feel this immense relief, but it's also something that they know they need to, like, probably talk to a therapist about or work on unpacking more.

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Shohreh: Right. Is your Purity Culture Dropout program coming back, that people might be able to join it?

Erica: Absolutely. I figure that I'm going to run it another time this fall, maybe twice. I haven't set a date yet, but it's definitely going to be a regular part of what I do.

Shohreh: Awesome. And I'll link to your Instagram as well so that people can follow you if they are interested in that because I know you'll post about it when the time comes, that you're opening it up again.

Erica: Yeah. Thank you.

Shohreh: So because this is a podcast about health and wellness, of course, I would love to ask you what you think are some of the keys to having good sexual health.

Erica: That is such a good question. I think, first of all, when people think of sexual health, they think of their genitals. They think about STDs, and that's about it. Sexual health to a lot of folks means getting tested, staying-- practicing safer sex, using condoms, but that is just a tiny fraction of sex and sexual health

There is a definition from the World Health Organization of what sexual health is. I wish I had it, like, handy. Maybe I can send it to you for the show notes because it's such a cool definition, but it's basically-- like the gist of it is that sexual health is not merely just the absence of disease. That's not sexual health. It's not just, like, "Okay. I don't have STIs right now."

And also, if we narrow it to the absence of disease, we shame people that do have sexually transmitted infections which is a humongous amount of the population.

So sexual health also involves the health of your intimate relationships, how you relate to your own gender and gender identity, how you relate to your own sexual identity and attractions, how you treat people in intimate relationships and how they treat you.

Do you have people that you can talk to about sex and sexuality, or are these topics too shameful for you to discuss with other folks? Can you talk to your healthcare providers about sex and sexuality? Can you talk to your mental health practitioners about it? Do you enjoy sex? Does sex feel good to you? Do you feel like you can explore sexually with partners? Do you feel like you can ask partners for what you want? Are you comfortable with your own body? Your own sexual response, is it something you understand? Are you comfortable with masturbation?

Those are just some of the things that are coming to mind, but it's definitely more than just getting your STI checkups.

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Shohreh: You listed so many things that I think a lot of people probably have never thought of as having to do with their sexual health. So I think that will give people a lot to think about in this department, which is really amazing.

Erica: I just want to note, in case I slipped up and said STDs, I want to make sure that folks know the difference. STDs, what most people think is sexually transmitted disease, but the terminology that's preferred is actually STI.

So that's a much less stigmatizing way, and infection is a much more accurate description than disease, you know? If you get chlamydia, you don't have a disease. You have a bacterial infection.

So if I had said STD at any point in this podcast interview, which maybe I didn't, but I just wanted to say that I correct myself and make sure that I said STIs. And I think that's important language for folks to use in their own lives as well.

Shohreh: Thank you for clarifying that because I do you think a lot of people are still using STD. And I care a lot about language and using language that best represents whatever it is that we're trying to say.

So now you guys know. You're going to use STI, not STD in the future whenever you want to talk about this.

Erica: Yep.

Shohreh: Amazing. Well, it has been so wonderful talking to you about all things sex and purity culture and sexual health.

I always wrap up my episodes with the same question which is how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Erica: Oh. Oh. That is such a good question. You have so many good questions.

Shohreh: Why thank you.

Erica: Okay. Okay. So much like probably a lot of people you know, maybe even yourself and other guests, my version of health and wellness used to involve the size of my body. And it doesn't anymore, which is a huge, massive mindset shift for me.

I have been working very hard in the last couple years on Health At Every Size, fat acceptance. I'm living in a larger body than I had previously. And for me, becoming comfortable with that is my current idea of health and wellness.

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I'm also turning 40 this summer. So I'm starting to think about other things that I hadn't had to think about like, "Oh, now it's time for mammograms." Like, that's not something I had to deal with before.

So my version of health and wellness is really accepting what my body is doing right now and also sort of looking towards the future because now I know that with age comes things that I didn't have to think about before. So yeah. That's it for me.

Shohreh: I like that you mentioned looking towards the future as well because sometimes, people will ask, you know, "Well, why do I need to maybe make certain choices around food or exercise or the doctor," whatever. And a lot of times, the reason is future facing. It's thinking about, like, "Okay. Well, where do I want to be 10/20/30 years from now? And what choices can I make now that will make sure--" or not make sure that you get there but that will give you a better chance of getting wherever it is that you want to be.

Erica: Yeah. And I do, I'm active. I still really enjoy lifting weights. And I don't do it in the kind of competitive way that I used to, but I do, for my own life, find it valuable that I can be a very physically strong person, and that I can carry things I need to carry, and move around in ways that are comfortable for me. So that's another aspect of it.

Shohreh: Carry all those animals that you have around.

Erica: [laughs] It's true. Sometimes I do have to pick up the 70-pound dog and put him in the back of the car because he won't jump.

Shohreh: For those of you who don't know, Erica has a lot of animals. And if you follow her on Instagram, you'll probably get to see many of them.

Erica: Oh yeah. And if you're one of my private clients, they always walk in front of the camera when I'm doing my video calls with people. So I'll be like, we're having a moment. We're talking about your sexual identity, and then, like, a cat walks in front of the screen.

Shohreh: That's awesome.

Erica: Just part of my brand now.

Shohreh: I have to send the dogs to daycare to even do these podcasts, so I understand.

Erica: [laughs] Yes.

Shohreh: Well, thank you so much for being here. How can people find you?

Erica: I'm on Instagram. My Instagram handle is erica with a C-@ericasmith.sex.ed. I don't have a website yet. I know you just revamped yours. It is gorgeous, by the way.

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Shohreh: Thank you.

Erica: I'm working on it, but like I said, I just started working for myself, and I am still overlapped a bit with my old job. So once things settle down, I'm going to work on a website. But for now, Instagram is the best place to find me.

Shohreh: Perfect. I will make sure that that is in the show notes so that everyone can go and follow you.

This has been so wonderful and, personally for me, so liberating to very publicly on a podcast talk about sex knowing that, somewhere out there, my mom could be listening to this.

Erica: I love that. I love it. It's like we just chipped a little piece of the purity culture away.

Shohreh: We totally did. So thank you for that. It means a lot to me.

Erica: You're welcome. I'm glad I could help.

[music plays]

Shohreh: And that's our show for today. I appreciate you listening to and supporting the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast.

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And if you're looking for more information on what I'm all about and how to work with me, head on over to shohrehdavoodi.com.

Hope to see you for the next episode.