

## T W O

# Adult Sexuality

## *A Lifelong Story*

From the first days of life to the threshold of adulthood, your developing sense of who you are included what the world expected of you as a female. As you grew into your body and began to have sexual experiences, your values and your sexual interests emerged and your sexual story took shape. But your sexual story didn't end when you reached adulthood, and it doesn't close with marriage, divorce, menopause, or even old age. It is a lifelong story, made up of your ongoing discoveries about what it means to be a sexual person. No matter what your age, the ending has yet to be written.

You can spend your entire life capable of sexual response, pleasure, and enjoyment. To what extent, and in what ways, you fulfill the promise of your adult sexuality is up to you. You are the author of your sexual story, and if you are dissatisfied with any aspect of this personal narrative, you have the opportunity to revise the chapter you're living right now and supply your story with a new, more fulfilling ending. To do so, you have to review and reflect on the chapters you have already written from your childhood and the years of adulthood you have lived so far.

You may believe you know these chapters by heart—after all, you lived them. Just as reciting the words of a poem is not the same as understanding its many layers of meaning, being able to list the sexual experiences of your life isn't the same as fully understanding how they brought you to where you are today. Many women tend to take only a glancing look at their sexual past, moving on to other thoughts when their memories evoke a chiding response of *Girl, what were you thinking of?* or a wistful nostalgia for passion lost or an echo of pain at trust betrayed. Looking more closely at how your experiences, sexual and otherwise, have shaped your current sexuality is an important key to guiding your sexual growth in the direction that is

best for you. Looking forward, anticipating how various life events might affect your sexuality, can also help you meet challenges and opportunities with an insight that will contribute to lifelong healthy sexuality.

The discoveries that women have shared with us about the events that influence their sexual growth are as individual and unique as their faces and personalities.

“The first time I ever had sexual intercourse, I was ready and the timing was just right for me. I felt this curious mix of being in charge and being utterly vulnerable. I thought everything would come naturally and that I’d be hot with desire, but it wasn’t like that. I felt self-conscious because I wasn’t acting like the women I’d seen having sex in the movies. Now I think that the newness and the unfamiliarity of intercourse made me self-conscious. Being lovers takes practice. I didn’t know that then, but I wish I had.”

“I learned about one sexual myth the hard way. It had been fed to me with my cereal and trotted out with my Barbie dolls. It was that there would be a perfect Ken for me. He would read my mind and know exactly what I needed sexually. Isn’t this the age-old story? I got married before I knew who I was. For some inexplicable reason, I thought that loving him would teach me how to love myself. Sex was initially exciting, but I’m not sure I ever knew what I wanted sexually. It was all about him. Then the kids came and I was fed up with his needs on top of theirs. He was tuned out to all the daily demands. So I spent years withdrawing sexually and feeling resentful because he didn’t even notice that sex wasn’t working for me. We went to counseling, and I was smug at first, certain the counselor would join me in putting him in his place for being so checked out. Sure, she called him on being checked out, but it didn’t stop there. She also pushed me to look at how little responsibility I was taking for myself. I had to learn to speak up and be clear about what I needed and wanted. Now I grieve about the years we lost because we cycled between resentment and blaming. Good sex takes work, but it’s good work to do.”

As you read this chapter, we hope you’ll be moved to explore your sexuality in your present life as well as in your past. If you discover you have led your life as if sexuality were something you could shrug off like an unneeded sweater, we hope you will reconsider and find a prominent place for sexuality in your life. The women we know whose sexuality is an integral part of who they are and what they experience lead the full, vibrant lives that we wish for you.

“Over the years I’ve read many books about menopause. As a result, I grew to respect my body just as it is. I walk with a confidence that I never had in my youth. I am as sexual as anyone I meet. My body is far from perfect, but

I have lived and loved in it for decades, and I carry that with me wherever I am.”

“I’m a nurse. I know the healing benefits of touch. I sometimes marvel at how wonderful hands are: They comfort, connect, reassure, and sexually arouse, too. To me all of these things are connected to my sexuality as a woman.”

“It took some doing, but I got all three kids off to a sleep-over. Carlos and I had a whole night together—and it was terrific! Yes, it took planning, but so does everything else in a life as busy as ours. If we’re going to have a sex life together, we have to be intentional about planning it. Wild abandon is not for a working mother with three kids—unless she schedules it!”

Unfortunately, even in our enlightened age, many women think of sexuality as a series of disconnected, discrete behaviors. Women *have* sex, they *act* sexy, and they *think* about sex at various times during any one day. But sexuality is not something we turn on and off, like a tap. We are sexual beings all the time, and the more we understand about how this facet intertwines with all the others, the richer our lives become.

Just as sexuality is connected to all that we are at any one time, it is also an important part of us throughout life’s stages. Each stage of life comprises interlocking experiences and biological changes that influence sexuality. The burst of hormones you felt during puberty and adolescence transformed your childhood sexual curiosity into a strong fascination and a desire to explore all that is sensual. The emancipation you felt when you graduated from high school and moved out on your own led you to look for new relationships, including sexual ones. Your “biological clock” may have influenced your timing for having children. The physical and time demands of parenting may alter your sexual relationship with your partner. As the children grow up and move out, your relationship with your partner undergoes further changes. It may flourish, or it may break apart—either way, sexual activity and satisfaction will be affected. Divorce may impact your sexuality by depriving you of a partner or by opening you up to opportunities for better relationships and better sex.

During middle age, your body undergoes changes that can affect your feelings of both desirability and desire. The sense of mastery that comes from raising children successfully or succeeding in a career may infuse your sex life with new confidence and enthusiasm. Retirement may set you even freer to pursue pleasure in your body, including sexual pleasure. Failing health and widowhood may have a unique impact on your opportunities, desire for, and capacity to be sexual, but neither need derail your sexuality or sexual identity.

“Having breast cancer has affected my body on the outside, but it has made me stronger on the inside. I have even learned to love my scars. When I look

at them, I see what I have come through and conquered. In a strange way, I've opened up more to sex than at any other time in my life. I like to savor all of my senses: I've never appreciated them as I do now. Now when I'm stroking my partner, I'm not just focusing on arousal; I'm aware of the wonderful feel of the soft skin moving beneath my fingertips and the intimate connection we have. Life is fragile, and making love seems more important than ever."

"My husband and I had a sex life that was more methodical than sensual. One night I talked him into renting a racy movie. It showed oral sex and was very arousing to me. Later in bed I really let my hair down. I got my courage up, pulled the sheets off, and started stroking and then kissing his penis. It seemed very natural to get into the rhythm of sucking him. I noticed that his diaphragm was shaking a little. I was feeling pretty shy, so I stopped and noticed he was giggling. 'What?' I asked. He said, 'Your boobs are bouncing up and down—you look like you stuck your finger in a light socket.' At that moment I knew that I'd never, ever again throw the bed sheets off with Theo. My eyes were wide open, and I realized that sex was just the tip of the iceberg of our constrained relationship. I found my courage again and got out altogether. It was the most freeing thing I ever did. It took a while, but I am in a new relationship, and the sex is a lot of fun."

Knowing your sexual story means understanding how life experiences have influenced how you accept your body, experience pleasure, and relate sexually to your partner(s). It also means knowing yourself well enough to anticipate how these experiences might affect your sexuality as they occur in your future. This is, sadly, no easy task for women today. Although, as a whole, we discuss sexual matters much more openly than did our mothers and grandmothers, we still don't share our stories and experiences with one another as freely as we could. We commiserate about menstrual difficulties, and pregnancy and childbirth seem to bring us together to share the most intimate physical details of this female experience. But when it comes to expressing worries about what are "normal" sexual feelings and activities or to sharing the joys and trials of our sexual self-discoveries, we often hold back. Women tell us, with deep sadness, how much they regret having been afraid to talk to others about themselves, including their sexuality. They cringe about their "dumb" choices when we ask them to explore their past. They seem visibly lighter when we help them see, for example, that women learn to reach orgasm with a partner and that it often takes time; or that for most women arousal doesn't come automatically, like flipping on a light switch. Overall, our knowledge has become more sophisticated, but many of our worries remain the same. By resisting thinking and talking about these concerns, we deny ourselves the full opportunity to learn from other women about the common experiences that impact many of us as we move across our lifespan.

We hope this chapter will help fill this gap. We describe what women have told us about their experiences with major life events, and we pose questions that will challenge you to think about your own sexuality in similar situations, whether these events have already occurred in your life or still lie ahead. We also make suggestions for finding additional information about each topic, either in a later chapter or from resources listed at the end of the book.

In Chapter 13, we provide exercises to help you take an even closer look at how your life events have shaped your sexuality. In addition, we include exercises to help you see how your ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the values you've learned from others have influenced your sexuality. The self-knowledge you gain from reading this chapter and doing the exercises in Chapter 13 will give you the springboard you need to better benefit from the rest of the book.

## SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

What we call your “sexual story” is what psychologists talk about as your sexual development: the maturation of your sexual feelings, behavior, attitudes, and knowledge. As such, it is about far more than just your sex life at any one age or stage of life. Your sexual story is the product of all the events that occur at each life stage and how you respond to them. These responses, in turn, are shaped by your cognitive, emotional, moral, and social development. This perspective encourages you to explore and accept sexual feelings that might only confuse or worry you if you viewed sex and sexuality as one-dimensional and governed by one-size-fits-all rules and standards. The ever-broadening definition of what is sexually normal is liberating. Still, given how uniquely complex each woman's sexuality is, it's obvious that your sexuality not only *should* be defined by you but, really, can be defined *only* by you.

A large part of a woman's expression of her sexuality is, of course, the choices she makes about when to have sex and with whom. Years ago a woman's sexual choices were made *for* her. With certain cultural variations, she “saved herself” for marriage, giving her sexuality to her husband as part of her dowry, after which he could do with it—*her*—what he liked. A woman who was brought up to follow these rules might feel desperately bad just for *wanting* something different—much less for *doing* something differently. And a woman who didn't *feel* bad about having her own ideas and taking charge of her own sexual destiny was usually *labeled* “bad.”

For many of us, all that has changed. Now we have choices about when to have sex and with whom. Unfortunately, those choices aren't always easy to make. Would you give in to desire and have sex with someone even though your family and religious values tell you to wait? Could you explore the possibility that you are bisexual without feeling as if you were violating a taboo? How would you feel about choosing to make love to your partner when you don't feel all that loving, just because

it's easier than talking through your problems? Would having an affair sound the death knell for the two of you, or would you consider it just a brief fling? What if it were your partner who had the affair? Is it okay for you to have casual sex with someone you just met, but not okay for your 19-year-old daughter to do the same? If you finally ended your marriage because you could no longer live the lie that you are heterosexual, would you be able to have an active and open sex life as a lesbian, or would you remain celibate out of fear of shocking your friends and family?

As with all choices we make in life, sexual choices often present us with dilemmas—conflicts between two firmly held values, fine lines between wants and needs, mores versus manners, our needs versus someone else's, the benefits of planning weighed against those of spontaneity. How we resolve these dilemmas contributes to our sexual development. Not every sexual experience you have had or will have is transformative or momentous, but each sexual experience affects your ongoing experience of your body, your sense of yourself as a woman, your self-esteem, your sense of your place in the universe, and much more. When your sexual decisions are based on the personal values and external influences most important to you, your sexual experiences will generally feel emotionally comfortable and satisfying as well as physically pleasurable. If your sexual experiences today do not fit this description, it may not be your current sex life that's the problem but a pattern of past sexual decisions that contradicts your most important values and needs.

Time has a way of changing everyone's perspective; you need to take the factor of time into account when you reexamine the experiences you've had. Maybe you blush at your "stupidity" when you think about that person you fell into bed with in college when you were both drunk, but the erotic films that made your face flame then seem like a healthy part of a woman's sex life now—with or without a partner. For decades you might have lived by the precept that marriage is the only place for sex, but now, having fallen for someone 5 years after your partner's death, you think it is fine to be sexual without committing to each other. We know one woman who was unashamed of the number of people she slept with during her 20s but now reports unhappily, "I tend to keep a lid on in the bedroom because it's like I'm afraid that wild woman will reappear and mess everything up." We know many, many others who avoid intimate relationships altogether, pretending they no longer care about sex, when the truth is that they can't reconcile the less-than-perfect 40-year-old bodies they now own with their memories of the physical and sexual ideal they fulfilled 20 years earlier.

Development, sexual and otherwise, means *change*. If you can examine your sexuality today and say with confidence that you have matured and are where you want to be, then clearly your past decisions played a positive role—even if, in retrospect, it seems as if they must have been made by a stranger. If not, you can probably benefit from a closer look at why you did what you did in the past and why you're doing what you're doing sexually today. As to the future, forewarned is forearmed: Be prepared for the types of changes that women describe in the rest of this chapter!

## Kinds of Sex: What Drives Your Choices?

In the movies, sex just happens. That's not the way it is in real life, even though our romantic notions sometimes trick us into believing that sex is just the result of two people getting carried away in the moment. Some sexual encounters do occur out of sheer abandon. Some are undertaken after a lot more conscious, deliberate thought than others. Each sexual circumstance is unique. Whatever the case, we've found that most women benefit from understanding their reasons for their sexual choices—if not beforehand, then at least upon reflection.

You made love with your best friend in an attempt to comfort each other over another close friend's death. Your best friend is married. How do you feel about the experience? How do you *think* you should feel? How will this experience affect your future decisions?

At a conference, you slept with a fellow physician you'd just met hours earlier. You're now chastising yourself for being unprofessional. Does that mean you shouldn't have enjoyed the sex?

You really liked him and hoped the relationship would go beyond friendship, but when he asked you to go to bed with him you knew it was casual—just for fun. And it *was* fun. But now you're really falling for him, and he's still just looking for fun—elsewhere. You're wondering if, for you, there is any such thing as casual sex.

All of our sexual decisions are complicated, even if they seem quite simple at the time. You may initiate sex for one reason but come out of the experience with an entirely different feeling. One partner in a sexual encounter may have an agenda, while the other is really giving in to the passion of the moment. The reason you give yourself for a sexual decision may turn out to be self-deception. The reason it's important to understand all this is to improve your capacity for self-determination in the future.

### *Loving Sex*

A common reason for choosing to have sex with a partner is love. Loving sex is a powerful connection between two people who share a strong emotional bond; it's a way two people can say with their bodies, "I love you." Sex gains a new depth when motivated by love; love gains a new dimension of closeness when this profound emotion is expressed physically.

Loving sex is often depicted in movies and books and has inspired poems and paintings throughout history. For those who are in love, sex can at times be a powerful experience unmatched by anything else. At other times it can be a familiar and reassuring physical connector during the daily grind that can wear a couple down.

Unfortunately, loving sex does not always live up to its fairy-tale reputation. First of all, being in love is no guarantee of legendary sex. The earth does not

automatically move for women just because they are having sex, not even when they are in love. Think about your first sexual experience. Even if you had been head over heels in love, it was not a guarantee that your bodies would move like “figure skaters together on ice.” Whether you are looking for a few good tips or you seek the kind of powerful sex that poets write about, you will need to practice. See Chapter 13 for ways to understand your body and create better sex with your partner.

Second, for some people, having sex imposes pressure to declare love that may not be felt. No matter what age, some people will use “But I love you so much” as the reason to coerce a potential partner into having sex. Some women, especially young women, may even convince themselves that they love their partner as a way to assuage guilt brought on by the clash between a cultural or religious prohibition against unmarried sex and their growing sexual desire. Or they may simply confuse physical desire and emotional love. However it happens, when two people are mismatched in their reasons for a sexual encounter, the experience is bound to disappoint at least one of them.

We have met many women who, years later, were guilt ridden about a sexual experience or by an affair they’d had when they were dragging through the final months of an unraveling marriage. In cases like these, many women are greatly relieved to learn that it was perfectly natural for them to have sex motivated by sheer lust—or by many of the other forces discussed in the following pages. What’s important is to gain perspective on why they did what they did in the past and how it may be influencing them, positively and negatively, today.

### *Casual Sex*

Sometimes the motivation to have sex is pleasure, pure and simple. This is what many people call “casual sex.” Nothing seems to inspire such heated debate as this form of sex. Is sex without love immoral? Is sex with different partners safe, in this era of AIDS and STIs? Is casual sex a normal instinct for men but abnormal for women? Is *casual* the equivalent of *irresponsible*? Conventional wisdom on this subject has varied over the years, and the answers to these questions will always vary depending on the speaker’s cultural and religious background, life experiences, and other personal factors.

What does the phrase *casual sex* conjure for you? To some, it means any sex outside of an exclusive commitment. For others it may mean promiscuity. For still others, unfortunately, it may mean unthinking sex. What we mean is that casual sex includes any situation where two consenting adults enjoy physical pleasure with each other and the sex is responsible, nonexploitative, and mutually respectful. Perhaps a 28-year-old woman goes to bed with a man she met earlier in the evening; they are honest with each other and take precautions to prevent pregnancy and infection. Or a 50-year-old woman chooses to have sex with a woman she meets on vacation. Perhaps two residents of an assisted-living facility slip into each other’s rooms at night



so that they can be sexual. We believe the choices and direction shouldn't come from experts in such situations. Rather, they must be based on a woman's personal values, desires, and common sense. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, making the choice may involve reconciling conflicting values. One woman told us that although she has promised herself she'll have sex only when she and a partner have made a commitment to each other, sometimes she has sex with someone "just because it feels great." Another woman notes ruefully, "It's sometimes easier to have sex with someone than to talk with him about condoms."

*Casual* sounds easy, but responsible casual sex is anything but. As sex therapists, we tell our clients that casual sex, practiced safely, responsibly, and respectfully, falls well within many people's value systems—and for many other people, it does not. If you are going to make decisions you can live with, you have to think about which group you fall into ahead of time.

Biology may have a say in casual sex too, making it even more complex. More than at any previous time, we are now aware of the brain chemicals activated during sexual activity. Orgasm expands the brain's "banquet" of love chemicals, so the end result of what was to be casual sex *can* be propelled into closeness and connection—perhaps confusing the participants.

### *Sex as Solace*

"I was halfway around the world when I got the call that my mother had died. I was devastated. David was a colleague and good friend, but certainly not my lover. I needed to talk that night, and he listened. I needed to cry, and he held me. I needed to feel close to another human being, and we made love. I'll never forget his tenderness. I'll never forget how powerful my need was at that moment to feel alive and cared for."

There are times when two people with no permanent commitment to each other have sex, and the act is anything but casual. Intense emotions can trigger a hunger or yearning to make intimate contact with another human being, even if the shared intimacy might be fleeting and short lived. Although some women later regret or feel embarrassed about having sex as solace, their self-judgment is too harsh. Sometimes sex occurs when a person's grief, isolation, fear, or shame makes her momentarily vulnerable and open to sexual decisions that she would not make otherwise. The woman connects with her body because it temporarily eases the emotional pain she is in; it feels good to be touched and to touch.

### *Sex as Conquest*

If you are an adult in your 20s, 30s, or 40s, you may feel close to the cultural stereotype of sexual beauty. If you're in your 50s, 60s, 70s, or older, you may want

reassurance that you are still attractive. Knowing that you've attracted someone through your beauty and sexuality is a powerful feeling, no matter what the age, and many women have engaged in what could be called "sex as conquest" at some point in their lives. Some women confine their power seeking to flirting, while others choose to have sex with men or women who then become their conquests.

Is there anything wrong with this? Not necessarily, as long as you and the other know what you're doing and how it makes you both feel afterward. Sex that is motivated by power seeking alone turns both you and your partner into objects in a power play, no longer real people seeking real contact with each other. Most women we have counseled say that the thrill wears off in time—or they lose their taste for sex as conquest once they have been the conquered as often as they've been the conqueror. One woman put it succinctly as "fun but limiting." Sex as conquest is the epitome of other-oriented sex. Eventually, sexuality has to be about what you like about yourself. For an expanded discussion of this topic, check out "Desirable versus Desiring—Enter Cognitive Distraction" in Chapter 6.

### *Agenda Sex*

Women have always known that sex can be the route to any other goal or objective. Sex can be offered as some sort of unspoken barter, or it can simply instill the euphoria that makes a partner more amenable to giving a woman what she wants. This dubious feminine wile is rooted in the perception that women (as opposed to men) have little to offer besides their sexual favors. We call sex that is undertaken to manipulate someone "agenda sex." In general, it's problematic because it fosters uncertainty, resentment, anger, or all three.

Possible agendas for sex include proving something, bolstering the ego, feeling in control, manipulation, bartering, making up for some offense, and avoiding boredom. Some agendas are even well meaning. It's not uncommon for women to have sex with a partner to make him or her "feel better"—more loved, more attractive, more virile, and so forth. As an occasional gesture made out of love and compassion, this kind of agenda sex is not necessarily problematic. It's when sex is habitually undertaken without desire or love that agenda sex usually backfires in distrust and resentment.

"I don't really like sex with my partner," said one woman we know, "but he expects it at least once a week. He gets off, then rolls over and goes to sleep. I don't think sex with him could ever improve, so I just have it to keep him from bugging me." She is so busy keeping the peace that she may lose touch with her own sexual needs to make the sex better for *herself*. In the long run, satisfying a partner because a woman doesn't want to deal with the challenge of honesty will result in resentment and yearning; she'll resent her partner for his demands and oblivion, and she'll secretly yearn for a better lover who would be sensitive to her needs. Agenda sex always has a goal *other than* honest connection and intimacy.

### *Sex to Dispel Loneliness*

One example of agenda sex that is so common and important that it warrants separate consideration is sex that serves as an antidote for loneliness. Young women away from their childhood home for the first time or older women out of the security of a long-term relationship may find living on their own lonely. A relationship soothes you when you're lonely or scared. Many women say they put up with sex in a relationship because it is the price they pay for being with someone—and it's the *being with* that is important, not the *someone*.

“I never think about masturbating. I know about masturbation, but when I do it, I feel lonely and kind of empty. I like sex with someone because I like cuddling and sleeping together at night. It's not about sex; it's more about knowing someone is there.”

If you always need to be in a relationship with someone, perhaps you use sexual connection to relieve loneliness or anxiety about being alone. If you are having sex primarily to avoid being alone, we suggest that you may not be ready to have a sexual relationship at this time. Your work lies in learning to soothe yourself, learning how to be in charge of you, and yes, even learning how to be alone. This is not to imply that loneliness is not a painful circumstance for many people or that you “should” never feel lonely. But if you are bargaining with sex to avoid confronting your apprehensions about loneliness or being alone, mastering the aloneness is the better solution.

“I couldn't stand to be in my apartment alone. I would find excuses to crash at a friend's house. I invited Chris to live with me 2 weeks after we met. I knew we didn't have a chance of making it together, but I had sex almost without thinking about it, because I knew Chris would stay, and I wouldn't have to be afraid to be alone.”

### *Experimental Sex*

For many women (and men), sexuality is the most fascinating laboratory to which we have access. Because sex offers the possibility of seemingly boundless pleasure and limitless potential for human connection, some women engage in what we call “experimental sex.” This may mean exploring the boundaries of erotica (see “Suggested Resources”) or experimenting with heterosexual sex (for lesbians) or with lesbianism or bisexuality (for heterosexuals). Not everyone needs to explore their orientation or the boundaries of what's considered “conventional” or “acceptable,” but for some women this exploration is vital to their identity. They don't want to be constrained by narrow definitions or locked into one orientation. Still other women

find the thrill of the exotic or forbidden a compelling aspect of sex and enjoy experimenting.

### *Celibacy*

Some women choose to remain celibate. Celibacy may be permanent or temporary; it may include masturbation or not. It may be a lifelong religious commitment, or it may be a choice to avoid sexual activity while not permanently partnered. A woman may view celibacy—sometimes called “being nonsexual”—as a means of increasing nonsexual intimacy in relationships or as a way of avoiding exposure to STIs. Celibacy is behavioral. It doesn’t obliterate a woman’s sexual identity; she is sexual whether or not she’s having sex. That is true of asexuality as well, but women who feel asexual do not identify as sexual beings, nor do they have any interest in becoming sexual in their behavior. Although born into bodies that are capable of sexual response, asexual women do not care about sex. An asexual woman may engage in sexual activity, but it will not carry any significance for her.

Celibacy is different in that a celibate woman is aware of her sexual response, her sexual choices, and her sexual identity. A woman might choose celibacy in order to develop nonsexual relationships, to learn more about her own feelings, or to concentrate on a goal that she must attain in her work or personal life. Listen to what these women say:

“Being celibate is a conscious decision. You still feel all your sexual feelings. You make decisions about celibacy continually; you work at it. Sometimes people say the most stupid things to me. They’ll remark that because I’m celibate it must be so much easier because I never have ‘those feelings.’ What a flat, dull, two-dimensional view they have of me. I struggle with my celibacy, but I see what I gain by not seeking sexual connection with another. I feel that I am trying to deepen intimacy with others through nonsexual means—through friendship and honest dialogue.”

“Because I’m a nun, people don’t think I have sexual feelings. How wrong they are! There are days when I get turned on watching the mailman walk by. You know, you just don’t fall out of bed one day and become a nun. It’s taken me years of prayer, work, and spiritual reflection to understand my spiritual path. But I do value nonsexual touch; this is vital to my life. And I know that, for me, the only real way I can show my love for God is by what I show in my love for others.”

Sexual experiences are an important part of your sexual story. To better understand how they have impacted your life, reflect on the following questions:

- “Do my past sexual experiences feel the same to me now as I felt about them then? If not, what has changed? Do I like sex more now?”
- “How would I categorize my most fulfilling sexual experiences of the past: as loving sex, casual sex, sex as conquest, agenda sex, sex to dispel loneliness, or experimental sex?”
- “How would I categorize my most negative sexual experiences of the past: as loving sex, casual sex, sex as conquest, agenda sex, sex to dispel loneliness, or experimental sex?”
- “Is there one kind of sexual experience that predominates in my current sex life? Is it the same kind as in the past?”
- “How have I expressed my sexuality during a period of celibacy or abstinence?”
- “When I make a decision to have sex, what do I think of first: my own desires right now, the other person’s desires, how I might feel later, how my best friend will react, or some combination?”
- “Do I usually plan my sexual experiences ahead of time or just let the moment dictate?”
- “Are any of my past sexual experiences still a source of embarrassment, shame, or guilt? If so, what are some possible reasons? Do these reactions impact my sexual experiences today?”
- “If I devised a set of rules for making sexual decisions, what would they be? Are these the rules I tend to follow? If not, why?”

Decisions you have made in the past are just that—in the past. Appreciate the decisions that have brought you joy or helped you to grow in sexual wisdom. Learn from the decisions that you now regret and try to move on. If you find it difficult to accept some of your past choices, refer to “Tell Me It’s Not in My Head” in Chapter 15. In that chapter, you will find techniques to help you better understand and modify unfair and self-defeating thoughts and beliefs that can haunt you with feelings of guilt and shame.

Sexual decision making is as complex as any other set of life decisions. Some women wait to have sex until they’re with their life partner. Other women have sex with someone they’re with for the evening. You are always in the process of exploring your sexuality, because it is ever-fluid. We encourage you to ask questions, accept that there will be mistakes, take risks, and, above all else, be passionate about caring for your sexual self.

## WHEN BEING SEXUAL HURTS YOU

We’ve been describing sexual experiences as choices—either ones you have made or ones you may make in the future. In reality, not all sexual experiences are choices,

and some are hurtful. Sexual trauma can be so devastating that we've devoted a whole chapter to it; see Chapter 10. But even when a sexual experience seems positive, it can have a bad outcome, like getting an STI or having an unwanted pregnancy. Then there are those many experiences that leave women feeling guilty, ashamed, or confused. There is a big difference between the lasting effects of abuse or exploitation and the uncomfortable feeling that can follow a less-than-ideal sexual encounter, but all negative experiences call for self-care and reflection.

"We're all supposed to be so well informed these days that when I met Ian I thought he'd be like other guys I'd had sex with: up front about it if he had an STI. We cared about each other, and so I made assumptions I shouldn't have. I never thought about getting an STI from him, but now that I have herpes, I can't think about anything else. Whenever I even consider having sex with anyone, I think about herpes."

"I thought sexual harassment was something that happened only to dumb, naive women. In fact, I thought it was only dumb men who tried it. After all, there've been enough widely publicized negative consequences for it that I figured you'd have to be an idiot to try to get away with that today. Well, let me tell you, there are all kinds of harassment. I thought my coworker Matt was just being helpful when I started my new job. But his helpfulness was very controlling: For weeks no one else got near me, and he blocked my attempts to get to know others, especially guys. That's when I realized I was being harassed."

"When is a choice to have sex not really a choice? I'd like to tell my daughter just to say 'NO' loudly and clearly when that's what she means. But I remember once in college when I said no and no again, ended up sort of wrestling with the guy, and then just let it happen. After all, I'd slept with this guy before, it was the era of 'free love,' and it seemed silly to make a big deal of it. When it was over—which was pretty quickly—I didn't make anything out of it at all, but over the years I've felt ashamed. Why did I just give in if it was something I really didn't want? Maybe because it was uncool to make a big deal out of sex or maybe because I didn't even want to consider the other possibility—that this 'friend' of mine had exploited me and essentially raped me. Did I make a choice, or was the right to make the choice taken away from me? I don't really know, and that still bothers me."

As you look back on your sexual explorations, you may remember lonely, scary moments when you had to face sexual dilemmas like sexual harassment or discovering you had an STI. Perhaps there was a period in your life when you had to get drunk to have sex. Perhaps you entered a sexual relationship thinking that you were making an informed choice, only to discover later that you had been manipulated or

exploited. You may remember being forced to have sex or being sexually assaulted. These are examples of when being sexual can truly hurt you.

There's an old phrase, "You play, you pay." Although being sexual can sometimes hurt you, it's not because sexuality itself is wrong, dangerous, or harmful. It's because of a lack of information and a culture that too often tolerates exploitation, coercion, and absence of choices.

As you read about the sexual misfortunes described below, take time to reflect on the following questions:

- "Have I experienced this problem?"
- "If I have, has it impacted my sexuality?"
- "Have I taken steps, such as confiding in a friend, reading a self-help book, or seeking counseling, to deal with the hurt?"

### Sexual Assault

In any situation where you had sex because you were forced, drugged, drunk, or assaulted, you were sexually vulnerable and you were hurt. Sex wasn't lovely or fun; it was used to dominate and control. In fact, one out of every four women report having been forced to have sex at some time in their lives (Laumann et al., 1994). A woman's reactions to forced sex can range from tearfulness and distress to trying to deny it happened or treating it like it was no big deal. Because the range of reactions to forced sex is so wide, and because denying the event can lead to later problems with depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder, we encourage all women who have been sexually assaulted to speak to a mental health professional. Your nurse, physician, pastor, or community mental health clinic can help you arrange counseling.

Some types of sexual assault cause a trauma reaction of terror or deep shame and humiliation. Women can feel cut off from others, convinced that no one would accept them if they knew what had happened. If you have these feelings, we encourage you to read Chapter 10 to help you cope with the loss you've experienced.

### Sexual Exploitation

"After I graduated, I started to sleep with my high school teacher. I was 18 and he was 30. I thought I was cool at the time—until he brushed me off for another woman. I felt ashamed then, but now I'm appalled at *his* exploitative behavior. How could he do that?"

At some point in your life you might have made what we call "sexually vulnerable decisions." Perhaps you had sex with a much older person or much more

powerful person, like a boss. You thought it was consensual, two equal people at the time, but now you know you weren't in a position to make an informed choice. Perhaps you remember having sex while drunk or high, and now you can see that you were exploited even though you consented at the time. Just as rape and sexual harassment hurt a woman, so can experiences when someone took advantage of your sexual vulnerability. They can also have the long-term effect of eroding your confidence and trust in new relationships.

Women cannot and should not take sole responsibility for negative experiences, but in many cases their decision-making *did* play some role, and this may be a difficult fact to face. If you feel you have a history of repeatedly being in situations where you've been sexually vulnerable or a pattern of being sexually exploited, we recommend that you seek counseling to better understand your decisions and avoid further hurt.

### STIs, UTIs, and Yeast

"I say I don't like to have sex on the first few dates . . . and then I make sure there are no later dates. Or I say I have my period and we'll have to wait. Or I just stay home and watch TV. The truth is, I have genital warts and don't know how to talk to men about the problem, so I just avoid sex. It looks like I'm going to end up spending the rest of my life alone."

Sexually active women are exposed to STIs. Physiologically, women are more vulnerable to these health risks during their early adult years than at any other time of their lives. In a woman's late teens and early 20s, her cervical cells go through accelerated changes toward physical maturation, which dramatically increases susceptibility to STIs (Greenspan & Nakashima, 1994; Kenney et al., 1998; Burchell et al., 2006). It's a sad irony but true that the riskiest time in a woman's life for contracting STIs coincides with the stage in which she is most apt to be sexually active in many different relationships. This is the ultimate double standard; there is no equivalent in male physical development.

A woman may also experience chronic yeast infections or chronic urinary tract infections (UTIs). These recurrent medical problems are often so painful and irritating that the woman loses sexual desire.

STIs and other infections can cause a lot of unnecessary shame. Contracting an STI does not rob you of the right to have sex for the rest of your life, though you'll certainly want to take steps to protect yourself in the future. For more information on coping with these problems, see Chapter 8 for information about pain, Chapter 9 for a discussion of the impact of STIs, and Chapter 15 for suggestions about overcoming low sexual desire.



## Unwanted Pregnancy

“They say that no birth control method is 100% effective, and I’m living proof of that. I’m not even interested in this guy anymore, and I just found out I’m pregnant with his child. I can’t believe I have to decide whether to have this baby or have an abortion.”

Despite education, available birth control, and firm resolve, unplanned pregnancies occur. A woman’s life is thrown into turmoil as she sorts out relationship issues with her partner and makes a decision about whether or not to terminate the pregnancy. Regardless of the decision made, sexuality and passion from that point forward may never feel the same. If this experience has happened to you, you may have difficulty enjoying sex. Sex may no longer feel carefree and liberating—memories of the emotional roller coaster that followed discovery of the pregnancy can cast a shadow on future sexual experiences. If you can’t enjoy sex, you may find it helpful to read Chapter 15.

## Sex and Alcohol

“I used to get drunk before having sex, then I didn’t have to take any responsibility for it. My self-esteem got lower and lower, and the more I drank, the deeper the despair. I finally got counseling to sober up and help myself dig out of that pit.”

If you have sexual inhibitions, alcohol and drugs can make it easier for you to have sex with a partner. The problem is that if you come to rely on substances to produce the desired state of arousal you’re denied the opportunity to learn about your own sexual desire and arousal. Early on in your sexually active life with partners, even if you do not have a full-blown addiction problem but *do* have a pattern of relying on alcohol, you are holding back your sexual development by escaping (or so it seems) the social dilemmas and sexual decisions that you face. You let alcohol do it for you. Let us assure you: It doesn’t get easier to go it alone (without mood-altering substances) later.

Some women with a history of sexual abuse or trauma tell us they will intentionally use alcohol to dissociate and disconnect from the experience. Other women tell us they’ll use alcohol to “pump” themselves up for sex if they’re anxious or depressed. Unfortunately, no amount of alcohol or drugs will make the underlying conflict go away or produce long-term sexual satisfaction.

Being in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction also requires new sexual awareness, since you may never have had a sexual experience without being high. In the sexual arena you will need to “begin at the beginning,” taking time to explore your values, your history, your relationship to your body. Many professionals in the

recovery movement observe that a person's sexual and interpersonal development stopped at the point where chemical usage began. If this is true, then you will need to have patience as you begin sobriety and the journey toward knowing yourself. The sexual exercises outlined in this book will provide you with tools to help you reconnect with your sexuality.

Most women either have had some bad experience with sex or know of a woman who has. If your sexual experiences have not been entirely positive, ask yourself the following questions:

- “Do I feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment about any of my past sexual experiences?”
- “If I were giving advice on sexual choices and decisions to someone I care about, such as a son or daughter or young friend, would my advice be consistent with the way I've made my own choices?”
- “Does recalling certain sexual experiences evoke different thoughts and feelings now than I had at the time?”
- [If you had a negative sexual experience:] “Have I gotten help from my health-care provider with any physical problems it caused?”
- “Does having sex today bring to mind negative memories of past experiences?”
- “Does it take a lot of time and effort for me to trust my sexual partner?”
- “Do I tend to think of sexual activity as merely a means of physical release, unconnected to emotional attachment?”
- “Do I have a problem with low sexual desire and arousal?”
- “Do I have difficulty experiencing orgasm?”
- “Do I associate sex with immorality?”

If answering these questions makes you aware that you may have had a negative sexual experience that is still harming you, consider reading Chapter 10 (“Trauma”) and Part V (“Developing Sexual Comfort, Confidence, and Satisfaction”). If these do not provide sufficient help, be sure to talk to your healthcare provider or consider seeing a therapist.

## WHEN ONE BECOMES TWO

Most women enter into partnerships that include sex. Falling in love is a time when the world of one person suddenly becomes a world of two. In the early days of a partnership, romantic love unfolds. Most couples experience a wonderful preoccupation with each other, accompanied by intense physical feelings of attraction and arousal. A partner's strong points become exaggerated and weak points are nonexistent. Sexual

passion is high, sexual activity frequent, and for a brief time, life can seem like a remarkable state of existence. But in all couples—heterosexual or gay/lesbian—that euphoric state gives way to the reality of day-to-day living. In Chapter 12 we discuss the challenges couples face as they make the inevitable transition from a sex life that seems effortless to one that needs attention.

### You've "Lost That Lovin' Feeling"

"Something changed between us. When did fantasies inch him out of my dreams? We're happy together and we've got a million interests in common, but I just don't lust after him like I used to. He thinks I've got a sexual problem, but I think my feelings are normal—that after being married for a while, you just lose the passion. I don't think he really tries to be sexual with me either—he just wants to fall into sex before rolling over into sleep. I don't know where the passion went. I miss it, but it's too hard to figure out how to fix it."

Most couples experience a decrease in passionate feelings after the first or second year of partnership. You no longer exaggerate your partner's strengths, and you're left with a life-sized lover. Sex can take a nosedive.

The drop in sexual frequency can occur for many reasons. When a couple is together over time, the sense of urgency about sex drops. The novelty wears off and affection is more frequent than passion. Both Helen Fisher in her research on romantic love (*Why We Love*) and Esther Perel in her writing about couples in long-term partnerships (*Mating in Captivity*) address the changes that occur in many partnerships over time (Fisher, 2004; Perel, 2007). Although boredom may be part of the problem, there is also the reality that new relationships allow fewer distractions and often rely on sex to cement the partnership. Once you feel secure in a relationship, other demands—household tasks, career, family, and friends—require attention and create fatigue. Fisher points out that romantic love is like a reward system and, once attained, is followed by a shift in the relationship. Perel describes the dynamic tension between the comfort of intimate attachment and the unpredictability and tension of passion. Simply stated, if you want passion, you must expect the unexpected and not presume to know what will happen next. It is the tension and thrill of not knowing that drives passion, and it is the comfort and predictability that grows intimacy. Long-term relationships will need to create ways to promote both intimacy and passion. Barry McCarthy, in his book *Discovering Your Couple Sexual Style: Sharing Desire, Pleasure, and Satisfaction*, gives an excellent description of the different ways that couples may choose to be sexual (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2009).

Women often tell us how unsatisfying their sex lives have become. They wish their partners were better lovers or that they had more time for touching and getting

turned on. They feel that if they weighed less, slept more, and had another 3 hours in the day, there would be time for sex and the sex would be better. Women tell us they feel more powerful and competent in managing their careers and household schedules than their love lives. Women claim they have bad sex because of a busy life, no life, or a lifeless partner.

Sexual problems like low sexual desire, sexual pain, anorgasmia (inability to have an orgasm), or sexual boredom can develop in any relationship. These problems can be the result of life stressors, tension in the relationship, or old fears and inhibitions reappearing once the intense passion and feelings of “new love” have subsided.

Every couple needs to take care of their sexual relationship by devoting time to creating fulfilling sexual experiences. Because sex is fun and pleasurable, we mistakenly believe we don’t need to work at it. Women who have had satisfying sex lives with one partner over decades report that they conscientiously make a place for sex in their lives, not only by making time for sexual activity with their partner but also by masturbating. If you feel you’ve “lost that lovin’ feeling” with your partner, Parts IV (“Creating a Better Sexual Relationship”) and V (“Developing Sexual Comfort, Confidence, and Satisfaction”) will help you take positive steps in your relationship.

“I was beginning to trash my partner to my girlfriends, complaining that all he wanted was sex and all I wanted was chocolate. Then I realized how crummy this was, as if I’d decided to get my power from trashing sex rather than being sexual. So I decided to turn things around. I told my partner that Thursday nights were just for us—no phone calls, no e-mails. Because we won’t have sex unless we get to bed at a decent time, I make an early meal. While he cleans up the dishes, I get in the mood for sex with a hot bath and some erotica. By the time he joins me in the bedroom, I feel more turned on and glad I set aside the time.”

### **Arranged Marriages: Unique Challenges**

In some cultures, forming a partnership presents unique challenges, especially in regard to establishing a comfortable sexual relationship. Arranged marriages are common in Indian as well as some Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. Women from these cultures may have their husbands chosen for them by their families. As adolescents, their exposure to sex education will be controlled and their knowledge of their future partner will often be limited. In an arranged marriage, sexual difficulties can emerge early in the relationship. The first sexual experience doesn’t occur until the wedding night, and there may be family pressure to prove the marriage has been consummated. A lack of sex education and experience and not knowing each other

can lead to problems with rapid ejaculation for men and painful intercourse and difficulty with arousal for women.

Many couples brought together through family arrangements report that, in time, they come to know, respect, and love each other deeply. As their relationship grows, so does their ability to explore and enjoy their shared sexuality. Some couples enhance their sexual relationship by openly discussing sex during their engagement and marriage. If they encounter problems, they seek advice, read self-help books, or work with a counselor.

“I wanted to respect my family’s wishes in an arranged marriage, but having grown up in North America, I was scared about marrying a complete stranger. My parents and I made an agreement: they would make a suitable match for me, but then I would date the person until I got to know him. I needed time to become friends and grow to love him.”

## Growing Together

Relationships go through different stages. At times sexual difficulties or lack of interest will correspond to a particularly difficult or challenging period of life. Yet many women also tell us that sex improved after they got through an especially trying time. Some women experience a stronger interest in sex in their 30s, others after their kids are born, and still others when the children leave home and the house, once again, is theirs. The sex you have in your relationship will be unique to the two of you, but certainly work, having children, aging, and illnesses will influence your sexual life together. The greatest asset to a good sex life is to remain curious and committed to growing together sexually.

If you are in a partnership, ask yourself these questions:

- “Do I care about being sexual with my partner? [If yes:] How have I demonstrated this through words and actions? [If no:] Is it because there are problems in the relationship, or am I feeling turned off by sex in general?” (Parts IV and V provide valuable information and suggestions.)”
- “When was the last time I made specific plans to be with my partner sexually? Did I follow through?” (If you can’t remember making any such plans, or you’ve made them but never followed through, check Chapter 14 for helpful suggestions.)
- “Which one of us tends to be the prime mover in our sexual time together?”
- “How do I picture my sex life with my partner 10 years from now? Twenty years? Thirty years?”

If you’re not currently in a partnership, take some time to reflect on the following questions:

- “How do I picture a long-term relationship altering my sex life? Would it be freeing or limiting?”
- “How do I maintain my feeling of being a sexual person even though I’m not in a sexual relationship?”
- “Would I like my future sexual relationships to be like any I have had in the past? If not, why not?”
- “What would my ideal sexual relationship with a partner look like?”

## AND BABY MAKES THREE

Couples who partner during childbearing years face the decision about whether to have children. Answering in the affirmative will have a dramatic impact on a couple’s sexual relationship because even in the process of trying to conceive, the focus can shift from passion to pregnancy tests. Other couples find the decision thrust upon them with an unplanned pregnancy. Either way, the drama intensifies as couples cope with coitus interruptus during pregnancy and childbirth or coitus interminable with the pain of infertility. These challenges are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

When women with children recall their lives pre-pregnancy and pre-baby, they often feel they were unaware of some important questions regarding their sex lives. If you are childless or considering having a baby, ask yourself the following questions:

- “How do I picture my sex life changing after having kids?”
- “Do I know any women who are mothers and with whom I can talk about the physical changes they felt during pregnancy and after childbirth?”

### “Baby, Baby, Where Did Our Love Go?”

Kids bring life, quite literally, to a partnership, but they can bring death to sex. With babies, priorities don’t just shift; they go through major upheavals. Some women fall so in love with their babies that their partners cease to exist. Their passion turns to nurturing their children.

“I could go through the motions of having sex, even fake it. But if you really wanted to see me show passion, it was when my baby Jake clapped his hands and said, ‘Mama.’”

Most women find that childrearing increases demands on both parents but primarily on themselves. There is less privacy, less (if any) time to be intimate, far more demands to meet, and far greater fatigue to bear. Current books on women, work, parenting, and homemaking document the grueling pace that has become

characteristic of modern-day motherhood. A woman can be up until 1:00 A.M. every night doing housework after homework, then sorting laundry, prepping for the next day at the job, and finally firing up the slow cooker because tomorrow is another day of carpooling the kids after work.

“Sometimes I look over at my partner, when we’re all sitting together, and I think, *What a wonderful person!* I’ll feel this surge of love that is sexual, too. The trouble is—the timing’s *all* wrong. When we’re alone together, I’m tired or busy with other tasks. If we’re just hanging out, there are kids, and I have to attend to getting them ready for bed and the next day of school. My partner says I need to put that stuff on hold and just come to bed so that we can enjoy each other. Why can’t I do that? How come I only put us first if someone else is taking care of the kids?”

On those rare occasions when women get together as friends, much of the conversation is about how busy and tired they are, as if fatigue were the primary bond that women share. So much for those sexy Saturday mornings in bed they so enjoyed when they were childless. Some couples may even think, *So much for sex, period!*

Women with children may feel overwhelmed by the extent of their responsibilities. They may also have ambivalent feelings about the changes in their post-pregnancy bodies and may resist being seen naked by their partners. They may feel resentment toward their partners, seeing them as unappreciative, uninvolved, and too demanding. It’s not surprising that many women during this stage in their lives announce that they don’t like sex and can live without it.

Because of the demands of raising children, sex often loses its place in the life of a couple. Some women simply resign themselves to becoming asexual; others refuse to relinquish this core part of who they are as sexual human beings but do little more than complain about their predicaments. Whether you have children or are thinking about having them, ask yourself these questions:

- “Am I getting together with friends to dump on sex and my partner? Have I thought about what I get out of these gripe sessions with other women?”
- “Is sex important enough for me to work on? If not, when will it be important enough?”
- “Do I complain about sex with my partner because I secretly fantasize that I could have a better sex life with some other partner?”
- “Do I believe that women have the power to create better sex lives for themselves, or are they helpless to make changes in themselves and in their relationships?”

If you don’t want your sex life to end just because you’re a mom, read Parts IV and V to identify strategies that will help you keep sex alive in your relationship and,

more important, in *you*. In addition, the exercises in Chapter 13 will help you better understand the origins of your feelings of helplessness and anger.

“We figured out that the house just wasn’t a sexy place for us anymore; there’s baby paraphernalia in every room. Some nights we have what we call ‘take-out sex.’ When the babysitter arrives, I’m out the door. First I stop for Chinese take-out, then I head to my office, where my partner meets me. We lock the office door and make love on the floor. I’m lobbying for a thicker carpet pad next time the office is redecorated!”

### Being Single with a Baby

For a number of reasons, a woman may have a baby without a partner. Women who do so remark that their sex life is altered dramatically and that being single *and* a mother presents challenges.

“It seemed that after I had the baby, I could meet only two kinds of guys. There were the ones who would run for the door as soon as they found out I had a kid and the ones who came on hot and heavy—figuring I must be desperate for sex. After a while, I pretty much gave up on sex and relationships.”

This “giving up on sex” is not unusual. For a variety of reasons, women go through periods of their lives when they’re not having sex. However, your sexuality is still part of you, and “giving up on sex”—meaning sex with a partner—does not have to mean giving up on the pleasure you can feel sexually. Find a place for sex through masturbation, fantasy, reading erotica, and taking time to be good to you. If you are considering involvement with someone, read “Endings and Beginnings” later in this chapter.

Whether partnered or single, children will occupy a big part of your life, but they don’t have to take your whole life. The pleasure you feel in your own sexuality can bring you a deeper and fulfilling sense of all of who you are.

## LOOKING 50 IN THE FACE

The greatest barrier to a woman’s sexuality in midlife is the socially transmitted disease of *ageism*. The vibrant sexuality of women in their middle years is often socially invisible, obscured by our dominant culture’s preoccupation with equating sexiness with youth. Nevertheless, women in their 40s and 50s continue to be sexually robust. Yes, your body changes; in life, change is certain. But by the time you are coping with the physical changes associated with menopause and aging, you are



doing so with the advantage of lifelong experience with meeting and overcoming challenges.

“We were heading out the door when my 16-year-old daughter turned to her friend Abby and said, ‘Guess what! My parents are going out to celebrate my mom’s 50th birthday.’ Abby looked at me and exclaimed, ‘Gee, that’s great. And you don’t look 50—in the face!’”

Our clients have taught us that women are sexual because they want to be and choose to be, not because they are young, in perfect shape, or gorgeous. Some of our stereotypically beautiful clients are the unhappiest because they have spent so much time obsessively striving to replicate the cultural standard that their view of themselves has shrunk to the single dimension of body appearance. They experience no inner peace or freedom in their sexuality. Conversely, many of our older clients describe an intimacy with their partners not possible in youth and a comfort with themselves unmatched in more youthful times.

“I love sex in my 50s. During sex when I was younger, I tried to hide my thighs with my hands or insist on having the lights off. Now I don’t care if my body’s not perfect. I leave the lights on because every little detail of our lovemaking is erotic to me, and I don’t want to miss a thing.”

### Passion That Isn’t Skin Deep

Aging can actually be sexually freeing. Many older women report that the increased confidence of age and experience gives them the courage to be more passionate in their identity and in their sexuality. A passionate woman wears the clothes she wants to wear and looks people straight in the eye and smiles. Passionate women develop an attitude that says, *I’m delighted with this age and this body of mine*. Passionate women think talking about sex is important. Passionate women take time to have sex with their partners or masturbate regularly.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that you don’t get the “looks” you got as a younger woman. You may be upset by the physical changes of aging and lament wrinkles in your face or increased thickness in your waist. Your hair may be thinning, to your dismay. If you are in perimenopause, the years before you stop having periods, there will be changes in your menstrual cycle, your metabolism, and possibly your energy level. You may find that your skin is drier and your muscles need more regular workouts to stay toned. Hormonal changes occur. Your sexual response may change. Read Chapters 4 and 5 for a discussion of the hormonal, physical, and sexual changes associated with aging.

Yes, these changes can be a challenge. You may judge your body’s new shape and state as sexually unappealing, causing you to withdraw from your sexuality. This is

a choice-point in your life. Will you continue to be sexual by finding a place for your sexuality and loving your body in all the shapes it will assume over your lifetime? In Part III (“Making Peace with Your Body”), we discuss body image, pain, illness, disability, and trauma and suggest ways to continue to be in touch with your body’s remarkable ability to be sexual throughout your life, even in the face of change and challenge. Ask yourself these questions:

- “If I’m physically uncomfortable, am I seeing a healthcare practitioner, reading books, and talking with other women about adjusting to perimenopause?”
- “Have I spent time masturbating and enjoying my own physical sensations?”
- “If I’m feeling more depressed or anxious, or not sleeping well, have I considered this might be related to perimenopause?” (Discuss this with your healthcare provider.)
- “Do I continue to recognize myself as a sexual person? If not, am I prepared to take responsibility to change my negative thinking?”

### Looking 50 in the Face Together

If you are in midlife and in a healthy relationship, sex with your partner isn’t skin deep. You’re likely aroused by your partner’s personality and your shared experiences. You may be less afraid of making sexual mistakes and more interested in making the most of your connection. Many times the early years of a couple’s sexual experience involve intense, explosive, genitally focused sex. Sex in your middle years tends to incorporate the luxury of exploration, taking your time, and expanding the sexual act far beyond the scope of the fast and furious genital rubbing and penis-pushing of earlier times. For those who have worked to achieve it—be they straight or lesbian couples—sex and intimacy may be intertwined in ways that are possible only through time and trial in a relationship.

“We took yoga lessons together. At first we felt awkward, but then I started getting turned on by watching my partner stretch. I suggested, ‘Why don’t we try tantra, spiritual sexuality?’ We started going to workshops, learning about breathing, energy, and spirituality. Where have we been? This has fired up our sex life by teaching us new ways to be sexually alive.”

Of course there is the possibility that your sex life with your long-term partner has become stagnant, predictable, and boring. Or perhaps a sexual problem has developed decades into your relationship. Maybe old preferred patterns of lovemaking don’t “work” anymore. Sometimes the type of stimulation that used to feel wonderful now feels irritating or even painful. Perhaps you were always more “passive” to your partner’s “active,” but now your partner needs more initiation and physical stimulation from you to achieve and sustain the same level of arousal as in earlier

years. Some couples take their sexual life together for granted. They have no language or experience for solving problems when they occur. One or both partners withdraw from the problem. Weeks drift into months or years, and sex is avoided altogether. Sleeping in the same bed with physical distance between you and your partner graduates to separate bedrooms, usually under the guise of other reasons (snoring, getting up too often during the night). See Chapter 12 for ways to talk about sex.

If you recognize yourself here, read Parts IV and V. Ask yourself these questions:

- “Have I ‘checked out’ sexually, settling for shopping and eating out as substitutes for passion?”
- “What happened to me during menopause? Did I stay in touch with my sexuality, or did I become so distracted with the sleep disruption and hot flashes that I ‘checked out’ of my body altogether?” (If your answer is yes, Chapter 5 may offer some ways to get back into your body and your sexual self.)
- “How sexually interested and supportive is my partner?”
- “Am I more turned on by fantasy—chick flicks, erotic novels, and the younger trainer at the health club—than by reality with my partner? [If yes:] Am I ready to stop escaping and address what’s wrong with our sex life?”
- “Do I expect my partner to fix our sexual problems?”
- “Does my partner have an unaddressed sexual difficulty [such as difficulty with orgasm]? [If yes:] Are we avoiding the subject or even sleeping separately?”

### Empty Nest

Looking 50 in the face often means also looking at a suddenly empty household. When children grow and go, it is often a mixed experience. At first your living space may feel different. Your relationship may feel different. You may feel different.

Elsewhere in the book we refer to *other-oriented* sex. This is sexual activity based not on what you feel, want, or desire, but on what the *other person* expresses, indicates, or desires. Life with children is certainly other-oriented, so your daily activities and sexual activities can mimic each other in ways that aren’t particularly focused on you. By the time the children move out, some women turn their backs on sexuality because they have lived with other-oriented sex for too long, and they don’t know how to be self-oriented in their sexuality (or perhaps in their empty nest). But many more women take a deep breath and relax, ready to embark on the adventure of sexuality (and time) for themselves.

Once children are grown, many times (hopefully) the child-rearing dramas go with them. Perhaps menopause and major work insecurities are behind you as well. You may have privacy for the first time in years. Although every stage of life presents

us with unique and varied challenges, this stage, at least, may be freer of burdening responsibilities and time demands.

“The first year or so after our youngest went to college, I felt torn when he would come home and leave again. I’d miss how his vitality would fill up the house. Then I began to notice a shift. After a while I’d enjoy his time at home, but my partner and I were getting used to our freedom and privacy, and we’d really miss that when he was back. Sometimes as we’d wave him off as he left again, I’d feel temporarily sad, but then we’d look at each other and make a beeline for the bedroom.”

Looking 50 in the face is tough, but it is a wonderful tough. The “gift” of time beyond reproductive years is something our ancestors couldn’t even have imagined. In fact, as we indicated earlier, as life expectancy continues to expand, you can look forward to having as many adult years postmenopause as you had during your adult reproductive years. You have been exposed to the myth—and it is a myth—that sex and sexual allure are for the young. Not so. That is true only if you allow it to be. Passion and sexuality come from the inside, and the secure sense of personal empowerment you may feel now that you are freed from the insecurities and uncertainties of youth can be the strongest aphrodisiac of all.

## ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

In life one thing is certain: there will be losses. A woman’s sexual life is inevitably affected by loss, whether it’s in the form of her partner having an affair, the death of her partner, divorce, or desertion. Relationships tend to end either abruptly or slowly and painfully. In the case of an affair, the relationship may not necessarily come to an end, but the fantasy of unending love and total commitment does. In this section, we explore common *endings* that women experience in their adult sexual lives and the important *beginnings* that can, and often do, follow.

### Ending a Fantasy: Affairs

In as many as 45% of marriages in the United States, one or both partners have sought sex outside the relationship (Atwood & Schwartz, 2002). There are many possible reasons for this pervasive pattern. People may be looking for what they think is missing in their marriage—be it passion, respect, or intimacy. They may be angry with their partner and want to “get even.” The affair may be the product of a moment of vulnerability—an evening of too much alcohol or a time of inconsolable sadness. An affair may be an attempt to repair an old hurt of being ignored and unloved as a child. In recent years, a new phenomenon has emerged—Internet

infidelity or “virtual affairs.” A growing number of women and men are turning to online relationships for emotional intimacy and eroticism.

Affairs can signal the presence of a wound that will fester and tear the marriage apart unless it is healed. Affairs are often experienced as a violation of highly personal space, leaving the partner feeling a loss of pride and self-esteem. Trust may not be restored easily. Sex in the relationship can become strained or nonexistent because it serves as a poignant reminder of the hurt and feelings of betrayal. Perhaps what is most difficult is that an affair destroys the fantasy that the couple will enjoy a storybook life together—that they will “live happily ever after.”

When an affair occurs, the question to be asked by the injured partner is not “How could you do this to me?” but “How could you do this to *yourself*?” For any chance of reconciliation, the person who has had the affair must grapple with this question. The partner has to ask similar questions: “What value does monogamy hold for me? What will be necessary to keep me in this relationship?” A couple who are committed to answering these questions honestly can best determine either how to repair what is broken or whether to bring the relationship to an end. They will make a commitment not to save the partnership at all costs but to be honest with themselves and each other about their goals and values. If promises are to be made, we recommend the partners make them to themselves and include these three:

“I won’t tolerate [or have] an affair again.”

“I won’t be silent about my needs or disappointments.”

“I won’t settle for the kind of communication, sex, and intimacy we’ve had in the past.”

Even when wounds heal well, they leave scars that will always be noticed. But scar tissue is tougher and stronger than skin.

“After the affair, we went through such turmoil. We argued, talked, and grieved. We each questioned whether we’d stay together. We went to counseling and began to look at the differences we had. We got very specific about the kind of partnership we wanted. It was a painful but important process.”

We cannot do justice here to describing the complexities of affairs and the ways in which people address and overcome these problems. If you are coping with an ongoing affair or the aftermath of one, we encourage you to seek counseling. You might also read the books on couples communication and intimacy noted in the “Suggested Resources” at the end of the book.

If you have had, or are having, an affair, reflect on the following questions:

- “What was I looking for by going outside of the relationship?”
- “Did I find it, or was it a mirage?”
- “Was I trying to hurt or get even with my partner?”

If your partner has had an affair, you may find answering the following questions helpful:

- “Did I assume there must be something wrong with me?”
- [If you entered counseling after the affair:] “Was my goal to bash my partner? Myself?”
- [If you chose to stay in the relationship:] “Why did I stay with [him or her]?”
- [If you stayed in the relationship:] “Have I been able to let go of my anger and hurt, or does it continue to cast a shadow on us?”
- [If you and your partner have resumed sexual activity:] “Has our lovemaking been out of a desire to reconnect or out of fear of losing [him or her]?”
- “Have my sexual feelings and responses changed since learning of the affair?”

## Ending in Divorce

On the wedding day, no one expects to get divorced, but the truth is that that’s how many marriages end. The number of women facing life after the breakup of a relationship is even higher when you include women who have ended civil unions or live-together relationships. Despite jokes about the wild sexual life of single women, being divorced is not the sexiest time in a woman’s life. Most newly divorced women admit that they don’t like casual sex and are looking for partnerships involving intimacy and mutual caring.

The months after the breakup of your partnership can bring depression, a drop in self-esteem, and a sexual shutdown. These feelings can prompt you to idealize your former partner and fantasize about reconnection. You may periodically have sex with your relocated partner and wonder if the two of you should reunite. You may even find that the sex is better now that you’re not in daily conflict.

The more ambiguous and ambivalent you were about the divorce or breakup, the more difficult it will be for you to grieve the loss of the relationship and make sense of your current life. Eventually, however, you will most likely realize that you can’t “turn back the clock” and you will move ahead. If you find you can’t move on, consider getting counseling and support to make sense of your feelings.

Looking ahead, you may fear that you’ll re-create past problems or may not trust your judgment about future partners. It makes sense to take time to know yourself better before rushing into a new relationship. This includes knowing about your own sexuality.

Sex may have been great in your former partnership, or it may have been awful. Now is the time to decide, on your own terms, what sex is going to be like for you in the future. Remember that being single doesn't mean anything negative about your sexuality. You're sexual regardless of your partnership status. Masturbation, fantasy, reading erotica, buying a vibrator, even checking out sexy websites are all safe and friendly ways to continue to be sexual. They don't involve a partner, require a babysitter, or commit you to meeting someone's first cousin from Toledo.

But don't stop here! Think about the ways that physical activity, friendship, and being in charge of your life can work for you. Singleism gets a very bad rap in many cultures. We are saying this: When you go to live life fully, include your sexual health and your identity as a sexual woman.

### Ending in Widowhood

Forty-five percent of women 65 or older are widows (Administration on Aging, 2000). In trying to take care of their sexual selves, widows face unique challenges. In most cultures neither they nor older women are viewed as sexual persons. Older women then face a kind of "double indemnity." Young or old, widows often report that they feel no sexual interest immediately following the death of their spouse, but over time interest in sex usually returns. Not only do widows face cultural stereotypes that negate their sexuality, they also may have to contend with strong internal ambivalence.

"It had been 2 years since James died. I wasn't looking for anyone, but when I met Alec I was very attracted to him. One night we began to get very sexual. Then it hit me that this was the first time in 45 years that someone other than James had touched me this way. I froze. I felt like I was cheating on James."

Grieving the death of a spouse requires considerable time and work. You'll never forget your partner—he or she will always be an important part of your life. But, in time, the grieving process will allow you to reposition your partner to another place in your life, one that is less central, less exclusive, less dominating. The grieving process will eventually free you emotionally to seek new relationships.

This process takes time—2, 4, even 8 years is not an unusual amount of time before someone is ready emotionally to pursue an intimate relationship. And there will still be times of awkwardness or guilt. There is no road map, only your own steady belief that you are going it alone and that you must do what is wisest and healthiest for you. During the interim, while doing the work of grief, it is important to remember that your sexuality didn't expire just because your partner died.

“In my loneliness, sometimes I would try masturbating, but it reminded me I was alone in my empty bed. Instead of being a sexual turn-on, I’d start to cry, and I’d lie there, my hands rubbing my vulva while tears streamed down my face. Then I realized that this was just how my life felt. I’d have good days and still want to weep. I began to allow sex back into my life the same way I did with other things, a little bit at a time—inching ahead. Sex reminded me that I was alive and what I was still capable of. It felt good to orgasm. I began to treasure my sexuality and see it as one of the parts of me that had been there before and was here with me now.”

### Beginning to Venture Out

Widowed, divorced, or single due to other reasons, you may feel awkward when reentering the dating scene. If you decide to have sex with a new partner, it can be intimidating and downright scary.

“When I was 22, it was hard enough the first time a partner would see me naked. Even though I had a pretty good sex life with my ex-partner, I haven’t had sex with someone in a long time and don’t know how it will work out.”

Beginning a new sexual relationship is even more complex and challenging if you have children living at home.

“Being single with kids meant making a lot of decisions with no road map to follow. I learned to be honest with myself, recognizing my vulnerability about wanting passion and sex in a life full of responsibility and work.”

When a single mom decides she’s interested in a sexual relationship, she has to consider the effect this will have on her children. She’ll have to take into account how old they are, how much time she has to spend with them, and their likely reactions to a new adult on the scene. She’ll have to decide whether to bring home the person she’s dating to meet the children, whether to have the new partner spend the night with her, and how and when to arrange time to be sexual.

If you are a single mom, many questions specific to your own situation will need to be answered now or in the future. The following questions may help jump-start your thinking about being a single parent and having sex:

- “At what point in a relationship should I introduce a new partner to my kids?”
- “Would I have sex with a friend or only someone I’m in love with? At what point in the relationship would I have sex?”



- “Would I be physically affectionate with my partner in front of the kids? If so, how far would I go?”
- “Would I ever have a new partner spend the night at my home—with or without the children at home?”
- “Would I spend the night at my partner’s place?”
- “Would I feel comfortable renting a motel room for ‘quickies’?”
- “Am I staying aware of my children’s emerging sexuality and their needs for privacy, predictable routine, and my ability to ‘go about the business of being a family’ without having to deal with a sexually charged environment?”
- “Do I explain to my kids my need to have friends and love, while assuring them of my continued commitment to them as a top priority in my life?”
- “Whether they are young or adults, do my children have the final vote about whether I explore the possibility of a relationship with the person I’m currently seeing?”
- “Parent or not, when the bedroom door closes, how do I feel about my sex life?”
- “And finally, am I practicing safer sex to protect against the transmission of STIs or to prevent pregnancy?”

### Remarriage: When One Becomes Two Again

New partner, fresh start. That’s the hope you bring to a new partnership. Some women report being surprised that sexual problems experienced before can reemerge in this new relationship. If you’ve put off addressing a concern, now is the time to tackle it. Review Part V, especially Chapter 15, to gain insight into your sexual difficulties and learn ways to overcome them.

All remarriages or new partnerships begin in loss. If you were widowed, you may experience a normal resurgence of grief when entering a new partnership, even though you’re happy to be with this person. If you have been divorced, you are likely to be “sadder but wiser” about partnerships, and it may take several years before you trust that this relationship isn’t going to break up.

When it comes to sex in a remarriage, the most important question is: Who else is in the house? If you and your partner are home alone, your sexual activity may be easy to establish, but in many remarriages kids and exes present formidable challenges. If you and your partner have teenagers, they may be uncomfortable with your sexuality and make comments like “You’re so gross when you hug each other.” This is not going to enliven your relationship. One set of parents coordinating the activities of one set of kids is exhausting enough; imagine the complications when you have up to three sets of parents and two sets of kids requiring coordination and accommodation. You can feel like you’re trapped in an endless cycle of figuring out whose kids are staying with which parents on what weekends. This too affects your sex life—big time.

“It was hard to keep my desires in check. After such a long dry spell, I wanted sex when I wanted it, but there were the kids, their activities, our jobs, constant juggling. I wanted this to be simple, but that’s not realistic.”

Women with children often report that sex in a remarriage can fade quickly if they try to make this new relationship mimic the early days of their first marriage. In a remarriage, you don’t have the same control over your freedom, time, or privacy as you probably had when you entered your first marriage. And your children certainly will not go out of their way to make your sex life easier!

Your sexual relationship with your partner will be most successful if you first take care of some basic rules for outside the bedroom. Research indicates that when you remarry, you and your partner need to give up your fantasies about a perfect unified family. You’ll need to address conflicts, tolerate stress, and normalize the need for flexibility in the new family structure (Walsh, 1991). You’ll need to recognize and combat unrealistic expectations that you may place on yourself. For example, as a mother, you may feel pressure to make the family “successful.” If the kids are unhappy in the remarried family, you may feel guilty about taking private time for you and your partner or having any sexual pleasure. Chapter 13 provides helpful suggestions for combating such guilt by identifying and fighting the underlying irrational or self-defeating beliefs and assumptions.

The answers to the following questions will help you build a positive sex life with your new partner while, at the same time, respecting the needs of your family.

- “Have I addressed the emotional baggage from my previous relationship? Should I consider counseling if I haven’t?”
- “Have we established a stable household with predictable schedules and clear rules and expectations for everybody?”
- “Have we explained to the children that we sometimes need to be alone in our own bedroom?”
- “Do they know to knock before walking in? Do we have a lock on the door so we won’t be accidentally ‘surprised’ when having sex?”
- “Have we discussed the importance of flexible planning for issues such as custody arrangements?”
- “If our kids are grown, have we discussed how they may find our sexuality uncomfortable when they visit?”
- “Have we discussed how we’re going to handle our frustration if sex gets interrupted repeatedly, or if we have to scrap a weekend away, or if we have to go weeks before we’re alone?”
- “Have we discussed how it will take time to create this new family and that we’re going to have periods of ambivalence and differences of opinion?”
- “Is sex a glue to help us through these times, or do we use sex to avoid discussion?”

- “Do I treat my partner’s requests for sex as one more demand on me?”
- “Are we willing to schedule sex so that we are sure to have special time together?”

As you read through these questions, you may recognize problem areas. Chapter 12 provides you with helpful suggestions for enriching your relationship.

### Being Single Is Not an Ending

The end of one relationship is not always followed by the beginning of a new relationship. Still, the end of a relationship does not mean the end of your sexuality. Some single women who were previously partnered can honestly predict that there is little likelihood they will find a new sexual partner. Their sexual response to this status is as varied as their circumstances. Some choose not to be sexual at all, others continue to masturbate and explore sensuality, and some even choose to have occasional sexual experiences. These sexual experiences, as we discussed earlier in the chapter, may be driven by passion, neediness, adventure, or desperation.

As singlehood stretches out over the years, a woman redefines herself, including her sexuality, from being partner oriented to being self-oriented. Unlike a woman’s young adulthood, later in life her single “sexual self” may not be highly valued by the culture. Women often remark that they have to encourage themselves to stay sexually vibrant. They work to keep sex as part of their life even as they refocus attention and passion on other aspects of life, like family, friends, and meaningful activities.

If you are single, ask yourself these questions.

- “Do I value myself as a sexual person?”
- “Am I willing to continue to explore my sexuality?”
- “Do I regularly allow myself to fantasize, read erotica, masturbate, and enjoy my sexuality in other meaningful ways?”
- “If I’m uncomfortable with my body and with touching myself, am I interested in doing the exercises in this book to help me grow sexually comfortable?” (The exercises in Chapters 13 and 14 will help you.)
- “If I am in a period without physical intimacy, can I get regular massages or facials to treat myself to being touched in nonsexual ways? Do I initiate hugs with my family and friends, ask for and give back rubs, or hold hands when we walk together?”
- “Should I consider some form of body work or exercise by taking a course in Feldenkrais body awareness, martial arts, dance, swimming, or any other kind of movement?”

- “Do I foster my sensuality in the ways that I dress or decorate my home or in the activities I choose?”
- “Do I intentionally think of myself as a sexual person? Do I allow myself to have sex with myself, be curious about sex, and enjoy this deeply important part of me?”

## THE 60s AND ON: “THEY SAY THERE’S BEEN A REVOLUTION”

“What amazed me was sex in my 60s. No one told me how much I’d get turned on and how fun it would be. I’m more adventurous than I thought I’d be, trying a vibrator and getting my partner to try one too.”

Older adults are breaking the sound barrier of sexuality. We are only at the beginning of understanding what happens to women postmenopause, but what we are learning is both frustrating and reassuring. Frustrating because the cultural “bandwidth” for female attractiveness ignores the beauty of older women and neglects the sensuality of lifelong passion, vitality, and wisdom in women’s sexual lives. An older woman may feel she cannot possibly find a partner with such an uneven playing field.

The rules of the game are slowly changing, however, as more older women are dating younger partners. Women are also going online and using their social networks to meet partners. And women are not waiting for a special person to “make them happy.” Increasingly, older women are engaging in self-pleasure, purchasing vibrators and masturbating to orgasm. They may acknowledge that sleeping alone or masturbating is not as much fun as partnered sex, but they are also acknowledging that they will not settle for the sexual sidelines in life. Women are orgasmic well into their 90s or 100s. Orgasm and self-pleasuring are part of one’s sexual health, and that affects general health.

Where does an interest in sexual health and sexual relating end? Individuals interviewed in palliative-care settings lament the lack of privacy, single beds, staff insensitivity, and general invisibility of their sexuality. Few are asked if they have sexual concerns while they are in terminal care (Lemieux et al., 2004). Age, illness, physical disability, or being single does not stop a person from having sexual health needs. What stops many women is being treated as if they shouldn’t have these concerns.

“Sexy grandmother” is *not* an oxymoron. The best-kept secret is sex in one’s 60s—that’s where the real sexual revolution is embodied. It’s a time when the expectation of sexual freedom and comfort is most likely to be a reality. Sex in a woman’s 60s is free of time demands. Not only do these women make time for themselves to exercise and pursue personal interests, but they also spend time masturbating and increasing their erotic focus.

Relationships also change. Characteristics of personal strength and assertiveness are valued, and sexual attraction develops from the relationship as well as from appearance. This pattern is in contrast to what younger people experience, where superficial physical attraction is often the initial basis of coupling, and vitality, identity, and depth of personality can be, unfortunately, afterthoughts.

And this sexual revolution isn't confined just to women in their 60s. Used to being ignored as too old or asexual, women in their 70s and 80s have gone about taking charge of their sexuality and proving just how sensual and erotic they can be with themselves and their partners. If they're in long-term partnerships, they find that sex and intimacy can deepen in ways that are possible only for relationships that have been tempered by time, shared trials, and honest communication.

Physical illness, disability, and stress over financial security and retirement can complicate sex during the later years. Widowhood also becomes a significant factor during this stage in life. But healthy or not, partnered or not, women in their later years continue to be sexual people capable of responding to sensual pleasure.

“What irritates me most in my 70s is the way that people write me off as a sexual has-been. We've always had a good sex life, but we didn't talk about our sex life with anyone else. Then I had a hip replacement, and before I left the hospital the physician suggested that I avoid the missionary position so that I didn't stress my new hip. ‘Make love on top,’ she said. At first I was embarrassed, but my partner encouraged me to ask questions. The doctor suggested that I go on the web to look at resources and to buy a vibrator. Now we're open to new ideas from anyone! We've been reading erotica out loud to each other, especially on days when my hip or his bad knee is acting up. To be honest, I think you have to be at least 65 to be erotic.”

### Confusing Aging with Poor Health

A common mistake is to confuse aging and poor health. Being depressed, overly anxious, or irritable isn't part of growing old—it's an offshoot of poor health. Disrupted sleep patterns can also be a sign of depression. Just as cartilage around joints wears away as we age, so does our neurochemical resilience; we just don't bounce back as quickly when we face challenges and stressors. Depression can cause you to withdraw from sexual activities you used to enjoy.

As you age, you may experience chronic medical conditions (like diabetes), mechanical difficulties (like joint or back problems), memory difficulties (like dementia or depression), or fatigue. Remember that your healthcare provider should be part of the solution, not part of the problem, so find medical help that is consistently supportive of you. There may be medications, physical therapy, or a medical procedure that can help you. Use the suggestions for finding a healthcare provider

that we give in Chapter 15. Practitioners trained in gerontology will usually be the most knowledgeable.

### **Accommodate; Don't Capitulate**

Sexually active women in their later years observe that issues of physical pain, mobility, and urinary incontinence are the greatest barriers to partnered sex. They find that healthcare providers may not be knowledgeable about their sexual difficulties or are uncomfortable discussing sex with women in their later years. Rather than giving up and going along with the social stereotype that sex is reserved for the young, these women find ways to make accommodations. Chapters 7 and 8 may help you make the physical accommodations you need.

As a sexual woman in your later years, ask yourself these questions:

- “Am I addressing my physical difficulties and willing to consider new ideas for medical care, even if these include medications, physical therapy, learning to use a walker, hearing aid, or other prosthesis?”
- “Am I exercising regularly, including my pelvic floor muscles [Kegels]?”
- “Would I consider an antidepressant medication to improve my mood, sleep, or memory?”
- “Am I avoiding sex because of urinary incontinence?”

### **Privacy in Assisted-Living Facilities**

Some women discover that their interest in partnered sex makes their grown children uncomfortable, and unfortunately many senior housing and care facilities often try to prevent sexual activity between residents and aren't comfortable providing privacy for masturbation either. The lack of freedom and privacy to enjoy sex is a great loss for many residents. Continue to remind your facility managers that older adults have a right to sexual privacy. If senior years are still ahead of you, advocate for the privacy of the seniors in your life who are in assisted-living facilities.

### **Going the Distance: Your Lifelong Sexuality**

Inevitably, all relationships will end, and the majority of married women who live past 80 will be widowed. In youth the possibility of facing this loss seems obscure and unlikely. Most couples who pledge “till death do us part” in their younger years have no concept of what they are promising. Women respond to this loss in different ways. Some may seek a new partner. Other women who are widowed or divorced in older age may choose not to seek new partners but to continue masturbating regularly. They report learning new ways to self-pleasure by using sexual fantasy,

vibrators, and dildos. Many cope with loss by learning to refocus their attention and passion on other aspects of their life, like family and social activities.

However they cope, women of age do not appear to meet this challenge by withering and withdrawing. It may seem a paradox, but older single women do not describe their lives as lonely or empty, despite the blatant fact that the majority of them do not have a sexual partner. In fact, they describe less loneliness than at other periods in their life (Friedan, 1994).

Why do women describe less loneliness at an older age? We may be tempted to conclude that sex is not important for women at this stage. That would be erroneous. Sex, intimacy, and touch remain important, but at this stage intimacy has been established in a much broader context.

Women have always been known for their enduring ability to form and nurture meaningful relationships. Whether in the quiet companionship of women quilting together or two friends exchanging voice or text messages in the midst of a hectic day, women tend to weave their lives around relationships.

Women of age have developed a capacity to experience closeness in many deep and abiding forms. This frequently translates into intimacy that does not depend upon, or define itself through, genital sex or intercourse. This does not mean that what is lost or missing is not grieved, but emotionally healthy older women do not seem to waste away or pine for what they do not have. Instead, they draw upon their remarkable abilities of connection to experience intimacy in ways that transcend narrow definitions. Ask yourself:

- “Do I continue to fantasize, masturbate, and enjoy touch?”
- “Do I draw pleasure in remembering positive sexual experiences?” (If memories of sex are traumatic, you may find it helpful to read Chapter 10.)
- “Do I continue to develop myself by being social and nurturing my friendships?”