



The
come
as you are
Workbook

A Practical Guide to the Science of Sex

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introduction

This workbook has one job: to provide practical, evidence-based tools to enhance your personal sexual wellbeing. If you want to develop a better relationship with your own sexuality, reduce your frustration or worry about sex, or maximize your access to sexual pleasure, you're in the right place. If you want to understand who you are as a sexual person, why your sexual arousal, desire, and pleasure are what they are, and how you can begin removing the obstacles that stand between you and great sex, you, too, are in the right place! Welcome! In these pages you'll find exercises, information, and tools that can deepen your understanding of your own sexual wellbeing and help you communicate clearly with your partner(s) about sex in ways that empower you to explore.

In the last few decades, the science of women's sexuality has clarified our understanding of how sex works. When seen through a scientist's careful eye rather than through a distorting cultural lens, every aspect of women's sexuality—from arousal to desire to orgasm—defies all preconceptions. While this workbook is written

for women (i.e., people who identify as women) and is based on the science of women's sexuality, people of any gender can use almost every tool and activity in it. That's by design, because everyone, of every gender, deserves to have great sex. Also, great sex comes from appreciating your sexuality *and* your partner's sexuality, and sometimes your partner isn't a woman.

There are some things this workbook doesn't offer. If you are looking for in-depth explanations of the science of sexuality, read my first book, *Come As You Are (CAYA)*. If you want to learn "techniques" for giving great oral sex or otherwise enhancing your sexual performance, you'll find those at www.goodinbed.com. And if you're hoping for an academic exploration of the cultural or political structures that constrain and police women's sexuality, there are lots of books that offer that, but this is not one of them. This workbook's one job is to help you enhance your relationship with your own sexuality.

how the workbook is organized

The workbook is organized similarly to *CAYA*. If you've read *CAYA*, you'll find this workbook deepens your understanding of the science of sexuality as it applies to your personal sex life. But even if you haven't read *CAYA*, the workbook can help you maximize your sexual wellbeing and facilitate better communication about sex.

It is divided into four parts. Part 1, "The (Not-So-Basic) Basics," is about the fundamental hardware of sexuality: your body, your brain, and your context. Part 2, "Sex in Context," delves deeply into the aspects of your life that influence your sexuality: stress and culture. Part 3, "Sex in Action," offers the science of sexual arousal and desire as an alternative to the cultural messages you

explored in Part 2. And finally, Part 4, “Ecstasy for Everybody,” moves beyond the science of arousal and desire to the science of pleasure and satisfaction.

Throughout the book, you’ll find questions from my “Q & A Vault.” At many events, organizers provide a box—it might be an empty, decorated tissue box or, one time, an actual miniature mailbox—into which people can drop anonymous questions. Over the years, I’ve accumulated a lot of these, written on scraps of paper, hotel stationery, paper napkins, and note cards. At the close of the event, I pull out the questions and answer them all, one by one. This workbook includes verbatim questions I’ve been asked by real people just like you, with the answers I gave the audience.

You can use the workbook on your own or with a partner; independently or with the support of a coach or therapist. Use it however feels right for you. Each chapter concludes with a “One Important Thing” exercise, to help you clarify your thinking and experience.

effective brainstorming

Several exercises in the workbook call for “brainstorming,” which means generating a lot of ideas and writing them down, without judging whether they’re good or bad. Some people are naturally good at it and enjoy doing it.

If you’re not one of those people, here’s an analogy that might help. Brainstorming is like the tryouts for junior high cheerleading. At those tryouts, there are two unbreakable rules:

1. Everyone—that is, every idea—is allowed to audition. Of course not everyone will make the squad, but only if you allow everyone, absolutely everyone, to audition do you

discover the hidden gem, the shy new girl who, though you'd never know it to look at her, can do splits and back-flips and yells like a banshee. Before you see her, you have to let every single kid, from the popular girls to the goth and emo kids to the math team, have their turn.

2. Tryouts have a time limit. You set a timer and you let the chaos happen, then when the timer goes off, you're done. Don't keep brainstorming until you find the "right" answer. Sometime you can't know which answer is right until you spend more time with the promising ones.

So to brainstorm effectively, set a time limit (just a few minutes!), and then write down literally everything that comes to mind, whether it seems right or not—whether it even seems relevant or not. It's normal to think of something and then automatically evaluate it, asking yourself, "But is that true? Is that what I mean?" or "Doesn't this idea contradict that other idea I just wrote down?" Set those evaluative thoughts to one side for the moment. You'll go through the editorial process later. Assume that somewhere between 50 and 90 percent of the ideas you generate when brainstorming will never lead to anything. Those ideas are not a waste! Their role in the brainstorm is to *get out of the way*, to step back and become a crowd that oohs and aahs when the hidden gems appear. And they can only serve that purpose if you include them. Write them down.

a note about relationships

This workbook's focus is on helping you, the individual reader, understand and maximize your own personal sexual wellbeing. This includes developing skills for communicating with a partner

about sex, but relationship skills more generally are mostly outside the scope of this workbook. Many great resources focus on relationship skills. Strongly evidence-based approaches for creating stable, happy relationships include John Gottman's *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* and Sue Johnson's *Hold Me Tight*. But the starting point in this workbook—and, I think, in many women's experience of great sex—is developing a stable, happy relationship with your own personal sexuality.

If there's one lesson I've learned during my decades working as a sex educator, it's that a woman's best source of wisdom and insight into her sexual wellbeing is *her own internal experience*. Sometimes our partners can be valuable mirrors, helping us to notice our internal experience. But sometimes we must sit quietly with our own bodies, hearts, and minds, and allow our inner voice to speak its truth directly to us. My hope is that this workbook will help you do just that.

Are you ready?

Deep breath. Soften your shoulders. Relax your jaw. Let yourself smile a little.

And let's get started.

part one

the (not-so-basic) basics

one

anatomy: no two alike

On the day you were born—or maybe even sooner—the adults around you looked at the body parts between your legs and declared, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!”

In that moment, your gender was assigned and your caregivers began to calibrate and organize their expectations for what toys you’d play with, what moods you’d have, whom you’d love, and how you’d love them. That assigned gender even shaped their expectations about how you should feel about the very body parts on which they based those expectations. And if they said, “It’s a girl,” chances are those expectations include some pretty toxic crap.

I’ll illustrate with two very different stories.

First, a woman told me about watching her grown-up brother changing his baby daughter’s diaper. When she was clean and ready for her fresh diaper, the little girl reached down and touched her genitals, and Dad said, “Ah-ah! Don’t touch that!”

How would he have reacted if his baby had touched her belly button?

How would he have reacted if his baby had a penis instead?

What lesson is that little girl learning about how she's supposed to feel about her body? And how do you feel about the idea of her learning it?

It's one tiny moment in her life, one that she will not remember. But it accumulates with uncountable other tiny moments, teaching her that her body isn't really hers to do with as she pleases, it's a foreign object to be avoided, a source of shame.

The second story provides a contrast. A therapist at one of my trainings told me a story about her two-year-old daughter. The therapist said, "She was on her bouncy ball and she started rocking and rubbing herself on the ball, and she said, 'Mommy, this feels good!' and I said, 'Yes, honey, that's your clitoris,' and she said, 'My clitoris is my *favorite!*'"

What did that little girl learn about how she's supposed to feel about her body?

What do you notice yourself feeling about the idea of her learning that lesson?

Few of us grew up with such clear messages about bodily autonomy. Most of us were raised, intentionally or not, with messages of *shame*. The shame is rooted deeply in our culture. Even the medical term for the "It's a girl" package of genitals—"pudendum"—is derived from the Latin *pudere*, meaning "to make ashamed," named for "the shamefacedness that is in women to have them seen."

But our culture is not our ultimate source of knowledge about our sexuality. Our own body is. When we can tune into its messages without judgment or fear; when we can see it on its own terms; when we can listen to its signals about wants and likes, what

it dreads and dislikes—we can communicate more clearly with partners, access greater pleasure, and transform how we live in the world as sexual people.

In this chapter, you'll try some evidence-based strategies that challenge and release the negative feelings about your genitals that so many of us absorb early in our lives. Many of them are exercises that were part of my training as a sex educator. Others are assignments sex therapists sometimes “prescribe” to their clients. All of them are optional. And all of them begin to shift the very foundation on which your relationship with your sexuality is built, because our relationship with our sexual bodies is the foundation of our relationship with sex itself.

No Two Alike for Transgender, Intersex, and Nonbinary Folks

For cisgender people—that is, those whose personal experience of their gender matches the gender they were assigned at birth (“It’s a girl!”)—I generally recommend befriending their genitals, treating them with the same kindness and playful affection they have for their best friend. But if you’re someone whose personal experience of gender doesn’t match the gender you were assigned—if you’re transgender, intersex, or nonbinary—you may feel great about your “factory direct” parts, or you might have a different kind of relationship with your genitals and other gendered body characteristics.* It’s not uncommon for trans, intersex, and nonbinary people to experience some feelings of resentment

*S. Bear Bergman starts all of his Sex Positive Trans Sex workshops with a helpful and validating reminder to attendees that I have always appreciated. He says, “Just to be very, very clear: no matter how you feel about your genitals or any other body parts, it doesn’t make you more or less transgender/nonbinary/genderqueer. Your gender identity and your feelings about your genitals are both 100 percent valid.”

or even grief about their gendered body parts. And if those parts have also been subject to traumatic experiences in medical (and other) contexts, they may be associated with big, uncomfortable emotions. Those are completely valid feelings, and they can result in a relationship with your genitals that, even on a good day, may be more similar to your feelings about an unpleasant work colleague you just need to tolerate.

Feel free to skip this chapter altogether if you prefer not to go there right now. Or you can replace or supplement the exercises in this chapter with the following two practices that some folks find helpful, and continue through the workbook from there. I hope these exercises make the start of this book feel less alienating for you.

1. **Give your parts names that feel right for you.** One trans woman I know calls her genitals her strapless, and if asked why, says “She’s not a strap-on, she’s a strapless,” complete with a runway-worthy flourish. When I saw sex educator S. Bear Bergman brainstorm with a group of students about words they liked for their own erogenous zones, one trans man said he called his genitals “Buck Rogers.” Why? It felt right to him.

Finding words that feel right for you isn’t just about building a healthy (if still difficult) relationship with your body. Vocabulary that feels safe and/or sexy can help you communicate with your partner(s) about how and where you like to be touched and even help you access less stressful (or less traumatizing) medical care. A competent and aware medical provider can use your preferred terms instead of the heavily gendered medicalized words, if you can tell them which words feel safer for you.

2. **Begin a practice of lovingkindness toward your body.** You may feel fine about your body and its many parts, or you might feel frustrated or upset about it (or both, or other things instead, or all of those things at once sometimes). It's very common that trans, nonbinary, and intersex people have complicated relationships with their bodies. A practice of lovingkindness isn't about "learning to love your body" so much as it is a way of wishing it well. Feel welcome and encouraged to wish peace and ease to body parts that you hope someday to say farewell to (So long! Pleasant journey!) and that you hope someday to welcome (Travel safely to me!), as well as the ones you currently have.

"Hello, [name]. May you know kindness. May you know love. May you know peace. May you be at ease."

exercise one

say the words

A lot of us can't even say the word for a specific genital part without feeling awkward—just seeing the words on these pages might “squick” some readers. Squick is an emotional reaction of withdrawal, avoidance, or disgust. If even letters on a page make us want to turn away, how in the world can we turn toward the parts themselves with kindness and compassion? In this activity, you'll practice living with the anatomical names for genital parts.

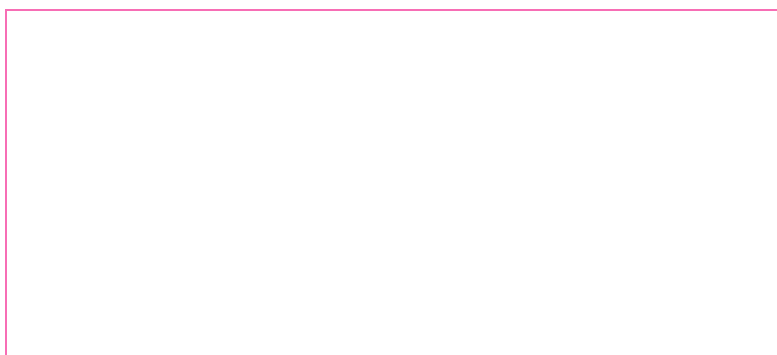
Sometimes the easiest way to begin practicing this activity is to try saying nongenital body parts. Try it with these three words—just read them slowly and notice, with curiosity and without judging, any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations they bring up:

Elbow

Tongue

Skin

Pause and take a moment to write down any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations they bring up:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin pink border, intended for the user to write down their thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations.

Now try it with these four words—just read them slowly to yourself and notice any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations they bring up as you read them silently:

Vagina

Vulva

Labia

Clitoris

Pause again and take a moment to write down any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations they bring up:



Next, I invite you to say the words out loud as you read them, saying each word very, very softly, even whispering it, like you're whispering a secret "I love you" to your soul mate, and notice, with curiosity and without judgment, any thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that brings up. Whispering "I love you" to your soul mate, say:

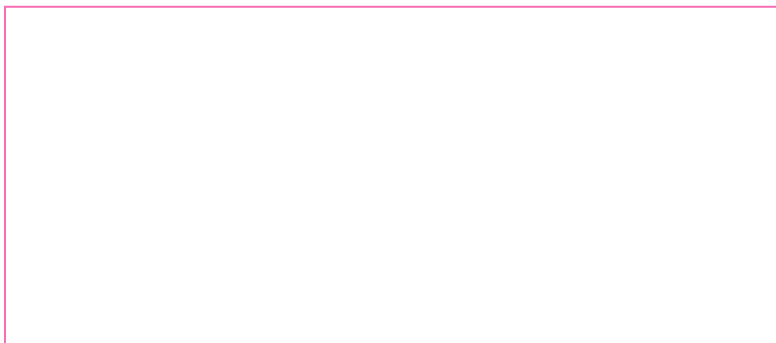
Vagina

Vulva

Labia

Clitoris

Pause for a moment and write down any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations brought up by saying these words aloud:



Now try saying it conversationally, like someone just said hello to you, and you're saying hello in return. Again, just notice with curiosity and without judgment any thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that brings up. Saying hello, say:

Vagina

Vulva

Labia

Clitoris

Pause and take a moment to write down any thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations they bring up:

