



SEXUAL LIFE IMPROVEMENT, INC.

~ From the desk of Shelley L. Imholte, PhD, LCSW, MSW, M.Ed.

WHY PLAY???

Playfulness is not just for children! As adults, we engage seriously with most areas of our lives and a cancer diagnosis is serious yet the seriousness that follows diagnosis and treatment often results in less than satisfactory outcomes for all involved. Playfulness is well-documented in facilitating healing, boosting morale, and increasing motivation yet playfulness tends to decline with age and manifestations of joy, humor and satisfaction are seemingly less tolerated.

The components of playfulness include: Questions for Discussion:

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| ◆ Creativity | When was the last time you created on the spot? |
| ◆ Curiosity | In what ways do you express a childlike curiosity? |
| ◆ Sense of Humor | How do you experience humor? |
| ◆ Pleasure | What is pleasurable for you? Who have you told? |
| ◆ Spontaneity | What was the last 'whim' you acted on? |

The functions of playfulness assist with problem solving, strengthen capacity to deal with frustration, and regulate anxiety. Playfulness is therefore adaptive. Playfulness in adulthood leads to embracing challenges and playful people are more equipped to navigate failure and/or loss.

OPTIMAL SEX

MUTUALITY is critical to experiencing sexual satisfaction. Yet, the ability to 'let go' and move toward a mutual choice requires that one be grounded first in oneself and able to effectively communicate. After all, one is unable to communicate sexual desires without some knowledge of those desires. There are reasons for exploration! Sex, as an instrument for bonding, requires great communication with each member(s) responsible for knowing their own bodies responses to arousal in the moment.

Six Components of Optimal Sex include: Questions for Discussion:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| ◆ Being present | What does it mean to you to be 'present'? |
| ◆ Authenticity | How do you give and receive honest feedback? |
| ◆ Intense emotional connection | How do you demonstrate vulnerability? Joy? |
| ◆ Sexual/Erotic intimacy | How well do you know sexual/erotic intimacy? |
| ◆ Communication | What type of communicator are you? |
| ◆ Transcendence | In what ways do you 'let go' in sexual expression? |

The exercises that follow this page are designed with both playfulness and optimal sex in mind. No, the exercises will not feel natural, and they are not designed to be engaged with spontaneously. They are real practices for you and partner(s) to deepen, take risks, and remain open without judgement. At first, they are likely to be awkward, WATCH for seriousness and engage in effort to 'let go' and be curious. IF you find it difficult to engage in these exercises, adapt them to fit your scenario, it may be time to have professional assistance.

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MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Mindful walking	Walking slowly feeling all four corners of the feet integrating inhalation and exhalation with each step of each foot.
Mindful eating	Touch, smell, and look at food prior to eating noting the textures, colors, and scents of the food. Place food in mouth and feel texture of food without chewing. Chew food for at least 30 chews.
Mindful showering	Standing still under the shower stream for a minimum of three minutes. Breathing into the sensation on the body as the water washes over the body.
Mindful car parked presence	Once parked at your destination (work, grocery store, home, etc.) spend three minutes on three distinct body areas. First, notice sensations of bottom of thighs against the car seat, then notice the sensations of the buttocks on seat and then direct attention to the sensations of the back against the seat.
Mindful breath counting	Seated meditation for three minutes with eyes closed counting one for the first in breath, two for the out breath and so on until thought emerges and once one recognizes mental content is present returning to the beginning of the count with focus on the breath.
Mindful phrase repetition	Seated meditation for three minutes with eyes closed repeating a phrase that focuses the attention on breathing. For example, "I am breathing now" would be a functional phrase for this choice. Begin with breathing in the word "I" and breathing out with word "am" and breathing in with the word "breathing" and breathing out with the word "now".
Mindful seated meditation	Sit comfortably on the floor with legs crossed in Indian style. For three minutes remain seated without movement as the breath flows in and out of the body. Notice when thoughts emerge and breathing fades into the background bringing attention back to the breath.
Mindful body scan	Lying in a comfortable position begin with breathing into the soles of the feet, then progressively bring attention and breath to the ankles, shins, calves, thighs, buttocks, genitals, lower back, abdomen, upper back, chest, shoulders, neck, face, and top of head. Plan for 30 minutes.
Mindful pillow breathing	Laying on your back place a pillow on the lower abdomen. Watch the pillow rise and fall for three breaths to ensure lower abdominal breathing. Repeat the rise and fall of the breath for a minimum of three minutes.

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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The foundation of effective communication begins with individual ownership, expressions of accountability supported by emotions. **I-Statements** are one method of effective communication due to the emphasis on individual ownership rather than blaming. Not only do I-Statements strengthen communication, but they also assist with identifying emotions, expressing those emotions, and decreasing defensiveness.

AVOID inserting *'that'* or *'like'* in communication as they communicate an opinion or a judgement rather than an emotion. When one uses **"I feel"** in conversation it is natural for an emotional expression to follow.

AVOID camouflaged **YOU-Statements** when in communication. When **"I feel like you..."** or **"I feel that you"** are used in conversation the listener is put in a defensive position while the speaker is avoiding individual ownership of their contribution.

WATCH for an emphasis on negative feelings or circumstances that minimize emotional expressions of joy, gratitude, relief, or satisfaction and promote defensiveness.

NOTICE when you downplay the impact of emotional expressions. This tendency minimizes the intensity of the emotion, therefore minimizing feeling both heard and understood by whomever you are sharing your emotional world with.

I-Statements communicate in **FOUR** stages and **REQUIRE** practice.

Stage 1 "I feel (state an emotion)..."

Stage 2 "**when** (identify what specific behavior was done that you are responding to)..."

Stage 3 "**because** (identify what need is not being)..."

Stage 4 "**what I want is** (describe the exact behavior that would meet the need)..."

Example: "Don't you know I am trying!"

Opinion: "I feel that with every attempt to try you have something to say"

Camouflaged; "I feel like you don't think I am trying!"

I-Statement: "I feel helpless when I hear that I have not done enough because I am trying to do what I can. What I want is to be supported."

Example: "I am counting on you to make things better."

Judgement: "I feel like there is something more you could do."

Camouflaged: "I feel like you don't want things to be better."

I-Statement: "I feel powerless when I do not know what to do because I am usually good at knowing an action to take. What I want is to be in partnership with you."

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COMMUNICATION EXERCISES

JAMMED JAR EXERCISE

MUTUALLY find an empty jar, vase, even a box can work. **MUTUALLY** decide where the container sits. Pick a space to place the container where it can be seen daily to be reminded to engage in the exercise. **MUTUALLY** designate a time period (usually 2-3 weeks to start, weekly if this exercise fits for you and your partner(s)) that the container will hold what has not been said. When you see the container, consider where you are 'jammed' up and have not shared this with your partner(s) for whatever reason. Write down a sentence using **I-Statements only**, or even just a single word will do, on any type of paper, napkin, etc. Crumble it up and place it in the container. Set aside a **MUTUALLY agreed** time to empty the jar together. **Turn off** phones, TV, radio, anything that distracts and be with. Flip a coin to see who begins then take turns pulling out one crumbled piece at a time. With each turn, breath, eye gaze, and voice what is on the paper without explanation or questioning, this is learning to be 'with'.

SHARED JOURNALING

MUTUALLY select a journal, notebook, or pad of paper and **MUTUALLY** decide where the journal will be placed. Each partner(s) chooses either face up or face down to let the other partner(s) know there has been an entry. Use the flip a coin option **IF** either partner(s) is accommodating, have a preference! Write down an entry using **I-Statements only** and respond with **I-Statements only**. This journal is a conversation, **WATCH** for 'you' language. This exercise prepares you and your partner(s) for face-to-face conversations about sensitive topics. This exercise is flexible. The partner(s) or single persons may use the journal to explore learned messages of sexuality, sexual expression, and cultural messages that influence sexuality and expression in the present. Journaling, whether with partner(s) or individually, supports exploration that may lead to choosing to change certain areas of your life.

SHARED SEXUAL FANTASY

MUTUALLY select a journal, notebook, or pad of paper and **MUTUALLY** decide where the journal will be placed. Each partner(s) chooses either face up or face down to let the other partner(s) know there has been an entry. Use the flip a coin option **IF** either partner(s) is accommodating, have a preference! Write down an entry to begin creating a shared sexual fantasy notebook. **ALLOW** for creativity, imagination, and expression to 'flow', attempt to 'let go' of what is 'right' or attempting to write for the other partner(s) and instead go with what is present in your mind as the partnership co-creates erotic content. **NOTICE** how the body responds when approaching to read partner(s) entry, while reading, and while responding to assist with being in your body.

***IF** these exercises prove to be difficult to engage in on a regular basis it may suggest that professional help would be beneficial.

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TOUCH EXERCISES

WHOLE BODY SEX

Touch is a very powerful sensory experience and essential for humans to thrive. The staged exercises below are designed to promote both an **active** and **passive** role in sexual pleasure through touch and breath. The exercise can be adapted to be completed alone or with a partner(s). You are encouraged to experiment with these stages on your own to learn about what type or touch you find sexually pleasurable. Please note that the exercise below **assumes** that **effective communication is in place** and that each partner(s) is **willing to take risks**, experience **vulnerability**, and is **open to acceptance** of body shape, size, function. As an adaptable exercise include lubricants, ice, frozen utensils, and perhaps body paint!

Stage 1: Each person explores the other's naked body for a full 15 to 30 minutes. **AVOID** touching breasts, buttocks, and genitals. **RESIST** trying to **give** pleasure, and instead focus on your sensations of pleasure from the experience. Each partner(s) will have a chance to focus on feelings of pleasure while touching. **FOCUS** on what your hands feel like on the other's body, notice the urges that arise, tune in to the sensation of your fingertips, knuckles, wrists, etc. **WATCH** which areas of **YOUR** body **YOU** find most pleasing to touch. Complete Stage 1 four times prior to moving to Stage 2.

NOTICE where it is in your body that you experience pleasure as you touch. **This is taking both an active and passive role in your pleasure.**

Stage 2: Each person will explore the other's naked body for a full 15 to 30 minutes. Follow the same exercise as above (avoiding breasts, buttocks, and genitals) but add body language requests for preferred types of touch. Let the person being touched guide you with body language moving in and toward desired touch, raising and lowering slowly and intentionally into the touch while using breath and eye gazing to serve as additional tools to guide desired touch while promoting connection. Position your body differently (i.e., on your back, on your belly, on your side, sitting, etc.), but not shifting too quickly from one position to the next, allowing yourself to feel how being touched in a variety of positions changes the experience of touch. Share with your partner(s) while eye gazing and speaking from the 'I' what it was like for you to intentionally move toward touch. Complete Stage 2 four times prior to moving to Stage 3.

Stage 3: Each person will explore the other's naked body for a full 15 to 30 minutes. Follow the same exercise as above (avoiding breasts, buttocks, and genitals) but instead of using body language to guide touch let the person being touched guide the other's hand to areas of the body

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that desire to be touched. Use breathing and eye gazing to stay connected with one another, watching the joined hands move over the body is also encouraged but returning to the gaze is important to sustain connection. The member receiving touch is encouraged to listen to the messages of the body about where touch is desired and to assert that desire through guidance. Share with your partner(s) while eye gazing, breathing and speaking from the 'I' what it was like for you to guide touch and receive guidance. Complete Stage 3 three times prior to moving to Stage 4.

Stage 4: Each person will explore the other's naked body for a full 30 minutes. Follow the same exercise as above (avoiding breasts, buttocks, and genitals) but instead of using body language or hand guidance to guide touch the person being touched verbalize desired touch while the partner(s) is giving touch and be curious about touch variations (pressure, light, pinch, rhythm, etc.). Share with your partner(s) while eye gazing, breathing and speaking from the 'I' about identified pleasures that also resulted in experiencing pleasure in your own body. Complete Stage 4 two times prior to moving to Stage 5.

Example Questions

"How does that feel?"

"Do you like this touch softer?"

"Do you like a firmer touch?"

"Do you like circular motions?"

Stage 5: Each person will explore the other's naked body for a full 30 minutes. Follow the same exercise as above continue specific requests for preferred types of touch and the use of a back, front, and side positioning of the body. Guide the person(s) doing the touching with your own hands, through movement(s) of the body to areas of your body that you desire touch or verbalize your request as you guide with body movement(s), hand(s), breath, and eye gazing. Share with your partner(s) while eye gazing, breathing and speaking from the 'I' about identified pleasures that also resulted in experiencing pleasure in your own body. Complete Stage 5 two times prior to moving to Stage 6.

Stage 6: Each person will explore the other's naked body for a full 30 minutes. Follow the same exercise as above; including verbal and non-verbal communication but add touch to the breasts, buttocks, and genitals of partner(s). If you desire add guided hands. Maintain specific requests for preferred types of touch to the genitals, buttocks, and breasts. Share with your partner(s) while eye gazing, breathing and speaking from the 'I' about identified pleasures that also resulted in experiencing pleasure in your own body.

BRUSHING UP THE BODY

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The skin is the largest organ of the body. The skin as an organ requires tending through touch. Touch is essential for human thriving. When humans are faced with challenges regardless of whether those challenges are health related, financial, familial, professional or political, moving toward touch may offer soothing. **IF** touch has been inconsistent across time the skin organ may react strongly to touch. Preparing our bodies to receive touch of any kind is a valuable exercise. This exercise assists you in knowing your body's reaction and response to stimulation and can be adapted for solo, couple, or multi-partnered practice. Choose body brushes in various sensations. These dry body brushes can be found at Target, WalMart, and Amazon costing between \$15-\$35. Start with dry body brushing either in the morning or at bedtime once a week for two weeks. Increase dry body brushing one day every two weeks. **BEGIN** with using the dry body brush on your own for at least four weeks before adding partner(s). If you are a couple both members body brush themselves for four weeks. By doing so, there is increased awareness of your own body which may promote requests for certain body areas for pleasure, soothing, and comfort.

LUBRICANT INFO

Benefits

- ~enhance sensations
- ~increase the intensity of sensation
- ~alter the way sex feels
- ~decrease pain with intercourse
- ~safe use with condoms
- ~self-pleasure discovery
- ~support touch experiences

Functions

- ~enhance sexual play
- ~ease vaginal penetration
- ~ease anal penetration
- ~boost sex toy play
- ~ assists with risk taking
- ~increases risk taking
- ~facilitates touch knowledge

WATER-BASED LUBRICANTS

Advantages

- ◆ Flush out of the body easier
- ◆ Wash off the body easier
- ◆ Adding water increases lubrication
- ◆ Widely available
- ◆ Flavored/Heat Variations
- ◆ Less Expensive
- ◆ Choice of consistency
- ◆ Safe with condoms

Disadvantages

- May feel tacky when dried
- Ingredients might be irritating
- Interruption of sexual activity
- Soaks into the skin

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Ingredients:

Water-based lubricants with ‘parabens’ (preservatives/antiseptics) might result in allergic reactions especially with increased repeated exposure. Parabens have been found to disrupt the endocrine system, possibly affecting hormones. Water-based lubricants with ‘glycerin’ (humectant/retains moisture) are byproducts of sugar increasing risk of vaginal pH disruption and yeast infections. Sorbitol acts as a sugar alcohol that the body metabolizes slowly. Take time to consider ingredients when lubricant use involves genitals.

SILICONE BASED LUBRICANTS

Advantages

- ◆ Non-drying
- ◆ Longer Lasting
- ◆ Increased slickness
- ◆ Effective for persons with sensitivities
- ◆ Massage Friendly
- ◆ Moisturizes the skin
- ◆ Effective in water play (shower, bathe, etc.)

Disadvantages

- Incompatible with Silicone toys
- Difficult to wash out of sheets
- Expensive
- “Coating” effect on the skin
- Less favorable taste

Ingredients:

Unlike water-based lubricants there are few differences among silicone-based lubricants. Dimethicone is an important ingredient in silicone lubricants and affects the quality and cost of the lubricant. Higher quality silicone lubricants will have a denser amount of dimethicone, listing dimethicone as the first ingredient indicates a higher density of dimethicone. Side effects such as itching, burning, or a severe allergic reaction are present with the use of all lubricants.

Oil-Based Lubricants

Advantages

- ◆ Longest lasting lubricant
- ◆ No need to reapply
- ◆ Massage Friendly
- ◆ Conditions the skin
- ◆ Thicker consistency
- ◆ Fewer ingredients
- ◆ Effective in water play (shower, bathe, etc.)

Disadvantages

- Ineffective with condoms
- May stain sheets
- Do not use with oral sex
- Noticeably different slickness
- Less favorable taste

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Ingredients:

Oil-based lubricants are usually derived from seeds or nuts such as almond nut oil or sunflower seed oil therefore allergies should be considered when examining ingredients. Common oils include and are not limited to evening primrose, coconut, avocado, olive, or grapeseed oil. Shea butter, cocoa butter, and/or vitamin E may also be found in oil-based lubricants and while they can support suppleness in the skin they do not feel as natural as water or silicone-based lubricants.

Lubricant Resources:

Women Voices for the Earth – Table of lubricant use and ingredients.

<https://womensvoices.org/ingredients-of-lubricants-chemicals-of-concern/>

<https://womensvoices.org/lubricants-womens-health/>

Sexuality Resource Center

<https://sexualityresources.com/category/sex-education-relationships/educational-brochures/>

Medicine Mama's Apothecary V-Magic Products

<https://medicinemamasapothecary.com/collections/vmagic>

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