Embracing Sexuality In Aging: Shatter The Myths Transcript

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Introduction and guest background

All right, everybody. Welcome back to another amazing session of the solving sexual dysfunction summit. I'm so excited because you guys are in for an amazing treat because we have with us Dr. Pepper Schwartz.

And this is going to be just I can't even go through all the accolades that she has, but we like research and TV and articles and books. I mean, she's probably, you know, done everything you could possibly think in the world.

So thank you so much. Do you do you don't mind me call you Pepper or you prefer Dr. Schwartz? Oh, please call me Pepper. Thank you so much, Pepper, for being with us today.

So what how did you end up in the field of sexual health? Well, there's a long story and a short story of the shorter story I'll refer to a long story in a moment is I was in graduate school and they were at Yale.

And it was the first year of doing an undergraduate course in human sexuality since Kinsey, and Phil, and Lorna Sarell were were leading it. And I was doing a book about the first year of women at Yale was it had been all male school up to 71 and we thought, well, part of what's going to be interesting about the dynamics of women in what has been for hundreds of years, a male school is to look at this human sexuality course.

And I read the material and so much was sexist and opinionated and not research based. And I kept saying, that can't be true. That can't be true. And then the research for me was, well, how to improve it. So I had to go into sex research because I intuitively felt that things like that said there was a book out at the time that said If you didn't have your children in first job by 25, you had terrible things happen to you.

Right? And I mean, come on. So. So there were other things that I felt we needed to know about better. But the long story is that when I was 11, my mother gave me a sex education book, which at that point was, you know, stick figures and sperm and egg chases and things like that.

Put it in the linen closet. Tell me I could go visit if I wanted to read that. And one day my friend Franny came crying over that her mother had co-edited, quote, her touching herself down there and told her she was evil and going to hell.

And she was very distraught. And I said, no, no, Franny, don't don't be so upset. You're not going home. You're going to the linen closet.

How Pepper Schwartz entered sex research

We did that. It's true story. And she she read there that masturbation was normal. And, you know, we were very naive. So with anything printed was real, of course.

And so I went to my mother after Franny felt better, and I said, Mom, we've saved Franny. We could save others. And I started a little discussion group in our basement.

So in some ways, you could see it was destined. I absolutely loved this. And, you know, it's funny. That's actually how I got my sex education growing up.

My mom handed me a book when I was in sixth grade. It was like everything you wanted to know about sex and why or something like that. And she was like, Here, read this.

If you have any questions, let me know. And for me at the time, I remember reading especially how, you know, how conception happened. And I'm like, the male puts the what?

Where I'm like, Oh no. I remember in sixth grade, I was like, I don't want to know about this right now. Fast forward. Look, you know what I'm talking about.

Yes. So. Yeah. And then, you know, I think the topic of aging and sexuality is so incredibly important. I mean, first of all, I mean, you've been in this field for a while.

Do you feel like we've gotten any further along with talking about sex than we have in the past in general? Yes. I mean, there's many there's a huge number of books you could have counted them when I was a kid, you know, I mean, on one hand, maybe there is at least in fairly liberal districts, there's a lot more sex education that goes on.

You know, are there some terrible areas of regression? Yes. But am I going to go there right now? But no, I do think we do. Now, the more specific question to me right now, are we talking more about sex among older people?

Yes, there's a little bit of advancement, but but there still seems to be a new factor. Know, maybe it's because, you know, it's your parents and you can't imagine them doing anything but cooking together if they do that or issues about body image, issues about all of the visions we have of sexuality or of young fit people, etc..

So I don't think we've had the yardage in talking about sex and aging that we have another sexual topics now. And I think, you know, and we're living longer and longer.

I mean, we're living now into her eighties and nineties. And so this is something that we need to be talking about. I mean, in fact, I'm going to throw a family member under the bus.

And if any of my family are listening to this, they're probably going to cringe. But when my my husband's grandmother died in her nineties, we were going through her stuff.

And I'm happy that I, as the doctor found like in her bedroom, a whole bunch of condoms. And they weren't condoms from the 1960s. They were pretty new condoms.

And I was like, Go, Graham, good for you. Because she was in her nineties when she died. But I think, you know, I think if the other frame that family members had found that they would have been a little bit uncomfortable with that.

So. Well, I feel that if we gave people more permission to continue having their sexuality as a prized part of their family, their pleasure, but their life force, we wouldn't be so surprised.

Or we wouldn't. Are we trying to help our older people if they're in a rest home or assisted living or whatever? We be trying to help them have privacy and and support for being sexual beings, but we're still kind of like neutering them at some age.

And that age seems moving back a little bit because as you say, we are living older, but we're not we're not expecting people. I mean, it was interesting.

I have a friend who is now in her early nineties, but at this time of my story, she was in her early eighties and gave a big dinner party to a lot of people at different tables.

Sex, aging, and changing cultural attitudes

A friend of mine leaned over to her and she's this friend of mine was there with her boyfriend, was in the eighties too. And my friend said, Do you still have sex to her?

And the woman turned over said, Of course. Now, I don't know if she was or she wasn't, but, you know, when do we feel entitled to ask for it? So just let it go.

You know, if they're still having sex, if they're 50 or 60, what what's the older they get, the less we, the more we're

embarrassed by it, unless we think that they're having it and there's some statistical proof that not as many people are having it, but it's putting it in that special like, could this possibly be happening category that makes people embarrassed, the idea that they're still being sexual.

I know even from my standpoint when I talk to patients, sometimes a reaction I get from some not everybody, but some of the older population is, Oh, that part of my life is over, or I'm too old for that stuff.

And I'm like, You're never too old for this. Well, and so part of the problem is, you know, they've picked up the cultural message or or it was never a really great thing for them, you know?

And so it's not a cherished thing to continue, but between the cultural methods that you outgrow it and the cultural methods that you're not sexy after a certain age and the and the cultural experience may be that it was never done the right way in the first place.

And the prohibition, particularly against masturbation, that only works against you. Yeah. I was going to say, what do you find to be the biggest issues when it comes to sexuality and aging?

Well, part of it is the prohibition against masturbation, because you lose partners. And so if you think your sexuality is only enabled by somebody else, you know it's over for you.

If you think it's over for you if you don't have a partner. So the numbers fall drastically among singles that say over 65, 70, whereas if they're long term relationships or family and short term ones, it's not like people are having, you know, wild sex overnight, but they have a continuum much more likely to have a continuing sex life.

So part of it's having a partner, part of it's not keeping your body in shape for sex. I mean, you know, I tell people if they decided not to use their left arm and then ten years later they said, you know, I want to throw a ball with it.

Their arms not going to work very well. They have never touched it since that. And the same thing. It's with, you know, erections and vaginas. It's sort of like, you know, you you need to keep it.

It's in shape. You need to use it. You need to keep the tissues vital. You need to make sure that you know what to do in terms of whether it's taking biographer a man or getting good lubrication for a woman or maybe topical estrogen, whatever it takes.

I mean, if I had, you know, people, they have tennis elbow. They don't just say, okay, I'm never picking up a racket. And if they try to fix a tennis elbow, so you have to feel like, okay, there's upkeep required from the sexual parts of my body and if you don't do that, then it's not as available to you.

Yeah, that is such an incredibly good point. I'm always telling people if you don't use it, you lose it. And and I agree with the masturbation because I guess as a gynecologist I talk about it like it's no big deal.

I forget that some people are very touchy subject because I, I just found out that may is international masturbation month and I did some posts online and I was surprised at the people that, you know, there were the people that were like, yeah, thanks for talking about this.

But then there were the people like, Oh, this is terrible. I can't believe you're talking about in person or I don't need to do that. I have a man. So, you know, that brings up what you're talking about.

What does cultural perceptions of it sounds? Oh, honestly, you know, I've done a lot of TV work for many reasons, but one of them would just be talking about, you know, a recent book I had done.

And I could talk about almost any sexual subject if they ever let me talk at all, but never masturbation. You either because it's religiously prohibited as people see it.

I mean, one little sentence in the Bible, boy, talk about a big impact, but the the idea being that pleasure, for

pleasure sake, I mean, that's sucking about pleasure because you're making love or having a baby.

You're you're manipulating your body to have an orgasm for pure pleasure and no other reason. And I think we are, like, scandalized at the idea of pleasure, of of just having the right to do pleasure for yourself without anyone else involved.

Yeah, that is a really good point because, you know, and on the other age end of aging, I wanted to do some education because unfortunately our town, just the Board of Education, decided to remove the sex ed from our curriculum, unfortunately.

So I was trying to talk to some of the moms about well, like I'll get some of the girls together and I'll talk. And I mentioned the word masturbation and yeah, I was met with there were a couple of moms who were like, Yeah, you only have sex to procreate.

Like, we don't want to teach our girls to, you know, unfortunately, you know, use masturbation as self-expression or, you know, as an alternative to sex.

Masturbation, dating, and sexual health in later life

So, yeah, I wish that conversation would become more of a norm and hopefully, you know, talking about it enough, it will. No. That's depressing news. You just give me.

What are you going to do? Yeah. Yeah. So what kind of advice do you end up giving to people or would you recommend like as we're aging, what what things should we be thinking about or how do we kind of keep our sexuality going?

Well, if you're single, I think your choice is masturbation or dating, which means you have to make sure that if you're a woman that you lubricates, that you're you know, that you feel comfortable, haven't you, making sure you have a condom because there's no other way of telling this preaching to the choir here.

But people often think, well, I'm not going to get pregnant. No, this will get a nasty STD, you know, so you don't your pregnancy is not the only thing you have to worry about.

But sometimes they they think they are they think he's a lovely guy and he doesn't you know, he couldn't possibly have an STD. So we do use a condom, you know, and then he's a pub as we'll know if he has one for all these ladies he think particularly and there was some years where they had real increases in sexually transmitted diseases in nursing homes, because there was, you know, fewer men than women because of of the women tend to live longer than men.

And so these men were on active duty and they caught something. They gave it to everyone. So, I mean, this isn't the conventional way of thinking of older sex, but I'm saying that you have to realize that you still have to do health behaviors as well as sexual upkeep if you want to see it that way.

I think the important thing is internally to feel you are lovable, you can be beautiful, you can be sexy, you can be wanted, you can want. You don't have to look like your 30 year old self.

You can look your 80 year old self and still turn your partner on or yourself on in your imagination. If you have a partner, I think, you know, it's this is going to sound very unromantic, but know you're not as driven sexually as you would have been.

I mean, the endocrine system is part of the machinery. But if you don't, you know, as you said earlier, if you never stop the the arousal mechanisms are still there.

And what I say is you sort of have to have appointment sex. In fact, I think this is true for all marriage, pretty much. If you just say, you know, we're only doing it when I feel it, you know, beforehand with children, with work, with, you

know, taxes, with whatever's making you nuts, you can go a long time.

But if you say Sunday morning or Saturday night or every Thursday, we're having sex, we'll figure it out. But that's what we're reserving it for. You will have it.

And people say, Oh, that's so mechanical. I say, Well, when you were thinking of a date as a kid and you had to wait till Saturday night, was it was it worse?

No, is better. You were so anticipating or excited about, you know, waiting for this date. Right. So, you know, if you play in it and then seduce each other, you know, and make it fun and make it sexy and make it intimate or whatever it is.

But you have to schedule it and make it you know, you could also like, oh, it's my husband. I'll go like, you know, it's been a while. We are having sex tomorrow.

Yeah, it's sort of like, okay. And with older people, if they have to probably the men over 70, huge number of them will probably need vibrators or some of them and some people don't.

And then the men get all like, okay, I don't want to do it anymore because I can have a hard on, but they can. There's lots of ways to do that now. Not to mention the tissue is is pleasurable even if they're not fully hard.

There's lots of ways to to get all those nerve endings recharged. It's having the self-image that you deserve it. The self-image that you want it and the self-image that you want to have both, you know.

And you are you are. So I mean, it's I look at Helen Mirren who is, you know, not getting plastic surgery. She is this you know, she's the elegant older woman and just from the look in her eye, you know, she's one sexy bride.

And that's what she portrays on the films. And yes, she's unusually attractive as a star, but but a lot of it animates from within her. And and so that we're the person that can make ourselves sexy just by animating desire and reacting with pleasure in an unabashed way.

And you don't ever have to lose that. And it's it's health producing. I could go, you know, you just going into your quiver with some of your arrows in it, but you know, you'll sleep better.

You get the right hormones that are good for your skin, then for your, you know, you know, oxytocin and all the androgens get going and and your with men, you're cleaning those tubes so you're less likely to get you know, you actually will have lower prostate cancer rate.

I mean, there's a lot of reasons not to mention just that sense of animation that it's a health procedure as well as a pleasure. What I love I love actually everything that you're saying and how you even think.

I mean, that whole setting time aside, like like you said, not even just if you're older, like if you're ever in a long term relationship. And definitely because I have you know, I've been married for 20 years and you're right, you get busy and it's like, okay, if you wait around like I'm tired or right, or there's something else to do and then, you know, take a step back to with the STDs that is actually so important with the older population.

You're right, because I see that especially with women, they're like like don't I can't get pregnant anymore once I've hit menopause and like, oh, I don't get pregnant.

So they kind of forget about protection, about STD is. And then I remember it was about a year or so ago, there was some jokes about that. There was the community down, a retirement community down in Florida which had like one of the highest rate of STDs in in the area.

And then one of my good friends, when she first went into practice as a gynecologist, she had bought a practice. And in her first weeks that she was there, she had a whole bunch of women that all came in with herpes and they

were all 65 plus with herpes.

And she was like, What is going on? Like she'd never seen that many cases of herpes in her life and backtrack. They were all on the same bus trip, so there was definitely some fun going on on that bus.

Oh, I have. So, you know, that stuff is you know, that stuff doesn't go away just because you're older. So it's viral and so you're kids to pregnant. You know, the president keeps on giving right of these.

And that means somebody has to be aware we we sex education we often think of it och you know they get it when they're pre pubertal or pubertal and they're they they're adolescents.

Confidence, desire, and staying sexually active

We tell them about the diseases, what to do, etc. And then we never talk to them again. They so, you know, so you either forgotten it or you don't know what's appropriate for your age.

But we don't really do that. So this guy who might have had herpes, maybe was asymptomatic, maybe it wasn't, or maybe who the woman was. She didn't know why she had this little stinging thing, but she didn't look she didn't ask.

She thought it was you know, she she didn't have a language for it. And then everybody gets to share in a very unpleasant I mean, some people have herpes, they barely know it.

And other people, it is not pretty. And it's it's and it, you know, they get a temperature and, you know, all those things that that are not something you want to you want to get but but easily avoidable if somebody is health conscious for themself and others uses a condom or doesn't do penetrative sex but has other kinds of of sexual touch or oral manual or whatever, there's all kinds of ways to enjoy your body and each other.

But but, you know, you need to be responsible, too, at any age. And I love that you touched upon that that beauty kind of from the inside, because I think confidence is incredibly sexy.

And unfortunately, you know, we're seeing some of these examples, especially among our celebrities, is as they are getting older, they're starting to mess with their faces and they they don't look like they used to.

So, you know, I don't want to throw Madonna under the bus, but I'm a little disappointed in what she's done because I was hoping that you'd be our example of somebody that was going to age gracefully and just kind of go with the flow.

But it hasn't happened. No. I mean, there's so much pressure to look flawless. I'm always wondering, though, when I see some people like that or think I was raised or whatever, oh, I assume that these people are so wealthy that they would get the very best doctors, you know, so you wouldn't be able to tell and then, you know, get these things like, oh, AMG, I mean, I'll tell you who was I mean, it's pretty.

It's a natural. But Jane Fonda looks beautiful. That's why she wrote about all the surgeries. She's dead honest about it. She suffered quite a lot for her beauty.

But I must say, she looks lovely as opposed and she looks for herself. But what worries me out and I feel bad for people if they come out looking not like themselves, you know?

I mean, you want a better version of you. You don't want someone else, you know, but you're fighting wrinkles and things like that. My guess is that Jane does so much body work that her your body isn't as good as her face.

You know, it's she's made that's a part of who she is. It's part of who she wants to be. She says she's done. She's very public about this stuff. But but the things we will do to ourselves, to to look good in our own eyes so often it has nothing to do with our partners.

Sees us to to look good for ourselves. You know, we have to do some work on that. Honestly, if somebody wants to do something surgical or wear makeup, I mean, we all not all of us wear makeup, but most of us do to make ourselves feel better.

We look better when I'm on television. Oh, my God. It's just plastered all over me. And, you know, it does look good on that. But it's, you know, anyhow, it gets but but so be it.

You know, I'm not going to judge what we need to look good for ourselves, but but we also have to know that what's sexy is is sexy does what? Sexy is sexy.

And I mean, you can be very attractive in that not that be putting out anything of a sexual being. You can be less attractive and before tasteless and and and I don't mean in a gross way, but, you know, I kind of like I get you whether you're a woman who wants women are women wants men or lord knows there's a spectrum on all of this that's the that's there's that thing where you see this person sexually alive and it it makes the more attractive but you have to feel that way.

You have to put it out there. And I think, you know, I'll I'll see very beautiful women and very handsome men who have zero sexuality and the emanating out of them because they have in Kosovo comfortable with it.

Excuse me. I've got dogs. Yeah. By the barking. So I mean the Europeans are much better on this stuff. They've had I mean if you remember art films for many years ago, there would be women who were past 50 and who were the romantic part of the love story.

And we've done a little bit of this with some of the comedies, actually, you know, where a few older actresses have been the love interest, but not anything like how many aging male stars are.

Oh, yes. You know, I'm somewhat encouraged. I've been trying to do this with my own chat show to no avail. They they just say, we know how you feel about her.

But to get older people in these reality shows and the The Bachelor for the first time. Oh, yes. Something called the Golden Battery, 71. Very handsome man.

And I was wondering like, okay, who are they going to pair with? And sure enough, the women that they've been putting on the commercials are in the sixties and seventies, too.

And they might I don't think they go low. Maybe they go up as low as by the high fifties. But but they're they're grown up women for him and some of them the old age.

And they look great, you know, and they're they're lively. They fit well, I think, at least from the trailers that I've seen, I would like to see more of that.

I think that encourages us. You know, you can look at their and say, well, I'm as sexy as that women are. They'll look as good as they're she's on TV, you know, I mean, I want I want to sell that inner self part.

Treating sexual problems and closing remarks

And that's what's really going to let women and men extend their sexual being away longer. You know, it's funny you made me think about I started taking pole dancing classes to get fit.

So we have fitness pole dancing here in New Jersey. And actually, there's actually there's a couple of places in Washington State. When I was out there, I'd check them out.

But I remember the first time I walked in, I was so nervous because I'm in my fifties and I'm thinking to myself, Oh, I'm going to walk in, going to be all these 20 something year old.

And I was so excited to walk in and find out that I wasn't the oldest one in the class. In fact, there was a woman who was in her seventies who just kind of burns circles around the rest of us and just, you know, exudes this confidence that just is absolutely amazing, you know?

And then there's a couple in their sixties and and then there's another couple in the fifties. And we do have a 20 something year old, but we have the whole range.

So it's been really nice to see that. So. Well, yeah, strong as you do that. It's just it's a lot harder than I thought it was. Yeah. Yeah, it was. I don't like the idea of exercise.

I was like, I'm going to do something that's going to be fun and a little bit challenging and different that will get me to exercise. And I actually have found that it's been it actually motivates me to do other exercise because I need to get the strength and do all the things.

And I'm still not anywhere close. But, you know, but it's a is a fun way to exercise. I rea I'm just saying. Well that upper body strength you need to do that those things.

I think that's very cool. So is there anything that I didn't ask you about aging and sexuality that you really wanted us to know about? What I don't want to say is if you have some problems, there are people who like yourself who specialize in sexual medicine.

Unfortunately, not a lot of them, because. But but they're there. And if women have pain and during intercourse, there are things that they can do about that.

They can fluff up those tissues a lot with hormones or with topicals or, you know, just much better lubrication, lubricants. That doesn't mean the end of the journey there.

They should know that the clitoris is a very generous organ and it doesn't degrade much and it's easily re encouraged. So there's, you know, there's no reason to feel like that has become an inoperable part of your body.

Far from it. For men, there's a huge number of things they can do about erections. They can they can do implants. They can do the Viagra types of of pills.

They can do suction. I mean, there are things that if they really want to make sure they can have an erection, they can do a lot, not everything, because there is some, you know, prostate cancer operations that they really but even then, the tissue is is is sensitive and pleasurable.

Even if there's not an erection in this, they have to feel like they're they can get they can still get orgasms, but they have to feel like, okay, I just do it in new way.

I mean, it's tough for people, but you need there's a lot you can do in terms of of your, you know, getting your butt, your your body back in shape. I knew I had a friend who turned out she and her husband hadn't had sex for ten years, and she was 70 when he left her.

And she went and realized she just couldn't get anything in the vagina. The vagina just clenched together. So she went through a series of expanders and eventually was able to actually she met this man who'd been in love with her for years, and when he heard she was free, he was right on it.

They had a beautiful love story. So but she had to go out and find a way to be sexual again. And the point is, you can't it's not over. Even if you've neglected all of this caretaking, you can't restart your body in many ways that you might not think you could, but you can't.

That is amazing. I love that. That's a great story, too. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us. Where can people find out more information about you?

Well, they can go to DrPepperSchwartz.com or PepperSchwartz.com You can go to married at first sight, check on them and they can see my work that way.

I just finished a book with this February with Jessica Griffin called Relationship RX, which is a lot of suggestions about how to deal with various level of couple problems.

So I'm around if you want to find me, I'm not too hard on Awesome. Wonderful. I'm going to go I'm going to go check out some of your books, too. So thank you once again for taking the time to speak with us.

I really appreciate it. So I have a lot of fun. I want to just remind everybody to stick around because we have more amazing sessions coming right up.