

## 24. "Holistic Pleasure" - Nichole McNichols

Okay. Welcome everybody to today's episode. I am so thrilled to welcome.

See, here I go. Welcome everybody to today's episode. I am so thrilled to welcome our guest.

She and I were chatting before we started recording the episode and we feel like we know each other because we follow each other so closely on social media. And so I definitely check, I encourage everyone to go check out her page. So I'm joined today by Dr. Nichole McNichols.

Dr. McNichols is a human sexuality professor at the university of Washington, where she teaches the largest, most popular course in the university's history. She is also a writer and speaker. Her work has been featured in a variety of sources, including psychology today, the Seattle times NPR, TEDx, the conversation and teen Vogue.

Welcome Nichole. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. Yes. I'm not surprised at all that your class is the most popular one at the University of Washington, because as I was saying, I followed you for a long time now on Instagram and you're obviously very informative, but your content is so engaging and entertaining as well. And I can see how it would be appealing to those college kids.

Thank you so much. I mean, I certainly try it's you know, of course, like everything I presented, my class is going to be backed by research, but there's also a human element to this, right. And the fact of the matter is I'm, you know, married, I have three children.

I dated my, you know, share of, you know, relationships that were really the best of my twenties. I've had a lot of experiences. So I try to kind of draw from that and present research, but also in a way where I'm really trying to help people.

So, right. Right. And I think that's so key is yeah, we're human at the end of the day.

And I think, you know, if we can get information across to people in a way that's also relatable, that's really the best thing to do. Yes, exactly. Yes.

So today we are going to talk about pleasure and I am so excited to dive into this topic because there's such a focus on desire. And obviously there's some overlap between the two. And I'm sure we'll talk a little bit about desire, but I don't think people talk enough about pleasure and satisfaction.

So we're going to discuss that today, but before we do, I would like to hear a little bit about how you got into the field. And I know you have a background in psychology, but you have the human sexuality focus. So tell me what your story is.

So my story is I have had a very circuitous route to being a sex professor. And so I actually, my PhD is in social psychology and I, my thesis was on motivation and I really did not do research myself on human sexuality. However, I was a teaching assistant for my time in graduate school for the current course that I teach now that I've taken over.

And it was through those years as a TA that, you know, running different aspects of the course that basically I learned more about sex. You know, as I like to say to people, you know, most of my knowledge is self-taught. So anyway, I had, you know, I had had like a year or two off after graduate school, done some consulting work.

When I was, you know, I had very young children and kind of had this aha moment that I wanted to go back into academia in some capacity and you know, had a conversation with my advisor who at the time I was applying for other jobs at different universities and asked him for a letter of recommendation. At which point he said, wait, why are you applying to other universities? Come teach here. It's like, okay, well that's convenient.

Yeah. And then, so I started out in the department and I was teaching mostly social psychology. Now, human sexuality, you know, social psychology is a huge umbrella and there is, you know, a huge, there are many sex researchers out there.

You know, for example, Justin Lee Miller who come from a social psychology background. So it's not that I don't want to suggest that my PhD was totally irrelevant, but it was not directly on sex. So what happened basically in a nutshell is that the professor who was teaching the class at the time, she fell two weeks before the start of the quarter and broke her leg.

And the department was desperate to have somebody fill in because at the time the class had 300 students and they were like, oh my gosh, what do we do? And so I kind of raised my hand thinking, well, this could be good. You know, I didn't have a permanent contract at that point. So it seemed like a great way to get started.

And so I took it over and it was basically Lois who was the previous instructor downloading everything into my brain every night before the lecture. And it was so much fun. And then a year later she retired and I took it over.

And so at the time it was, you know, a couple hundred students twice a year, and now it's grown to 1200 students three times a year, plus 400 over the summer. So it's 4,000 students a year. So that is incredible.

I think, you know, anyone who's taken a human sexuality course in college, I think knows how impactful those courses can be. I mean, when I was at, I went to the university of Texas at Austin and I was studying psychology, but I didn't really know what I wanted to focus on. So I took a human sexuality course as an elective and I was like, this is it.

I mean, I just, it was so impactful. I learned so much. And I think by the end of my time

at UT, I had taken all three of the human sexuality courses that the university offered.

I absolutely love that. Yeah. And I think that, you know, sex obviously drives so much of human behavior.

It's such an important part of relationships. And I can definitely see how coming from a social psychology background, there would be a natural interest in human sexuality because it's very social. It's at the core of who we are.

Right. And exactly. It is very social.

And, you know, I certainly did, you know, where, even though I, you know, I studied a lot on, you know, relationships and actually my, even my thesis looked at, you know, an element of motivation within relationships. But it is something that, you know, it's people, it drives a lot of human behavior. And it is yet one of the things that we, you know, we have very poor sex education in the U.S and people are afraid to talk about it and people feel guilty about it.

And people are, you know, as a result coming into sexual experiences with a lot of shame and not sort of this feeling that it's okay to be focused on things like pleasure and that it's important to have a healthy, you know, robust sex life, you know, unless you identify, of course, as somebody who doesn't want sex and just, you know, they're all right. Sexuality is a beautiful umbrella. And, you know, I'm, you know, I'm not, what I'm saying now is not applying there, but it's just something that's at the form of, you know, who we are and it just informs us, I think.

And so, yeah. So I love being able to be in a position where I can help people to kind of increase their pleasure and get rid, educate them so that I can get rid of that shame. Totally.

Totally. So let's talk about pleasure. So you, you talk, you've talked about the importance of assuming a holistic approach when it comes to helping people who struggle from different types of sexual problems, can you tell us a little bit more about what you mean by that? Yes.

So by a holistic approach, I'm not saying that I think you need to take vitamins and minerals and drink water and do deep breathing. Although those things certainly can't hurt and are very good for your health overall. Um, but really what I'm talking about is, you know, we have, you know, when we think of pleasure, right, it's, it has to, we have to kind of address it from many different perspectives.

And so, you know, of course, from a very basic perspective, it's about not feeling ashamed to own your sexual pleasure and to find out what feels good to your body and to prioritize it. And whether that involves using different types of sex toys or role-playing or figuring out what it is that works for your body, those things are definitely, definitely

important. But more than that, I just feel like our ability to enjoy sex really comes from a psychological place.

And I think that that too often kind of gets ignored, um, or not really appreciated. Um, so for example, I think that, you know, as we discussed, there is a lot of anxiety and shame, right? We're taught to feel embarrassed about just about every aspect of sex, you know, from a very young age. Um, but beyond that, right, we're also, you know, taught to be really hard on our bodies, right? So for example, um, I think body image, right, and trying to address underlying body image issues can really be sometimes at the heart of not being able to enjoy sex, right? Masters and Johnson, in their original sexual response model, you know, they, you know, talked about this, you know, phenomenon that can happen during sex called spectating.

And when you're engaging in spectating, you're literally coming outside of your brain, outside of your mind, outside of the experience. And you're looking at yourself from the outside, right? You're almost judging yourself as a harsh critic. And what that does is it keeps you from being in the moment.

It keeps you from being able to enjoy sex. It keeps you from being able to feel the pleasure and experience the pleasure and really focus on that. It keeps you from being able to look at your sexual, at your partner's sexual cues and to follow them.

So body image, I think is huge. I think addressing underlying anxiety and stress is huge, right? If we're stressed out and exhausted, um, I think things like sleep and nutrition and exercise and just physically feeling like you're in a place to enjoy sex is really important. Um, if there are underlying relationship issues, right? Those need to be addressed.

Now, the thing that's sort of, you know, interesting about sex and relationships is that they're cyclical. So it's, you know, it, it takes intimacy within relationships, oftentimes to lead to really intimate, um, pleasurable sex, but we also know that pleasurable intimate sex also helps people to enjoy their relationships, right? There's research that shows that the more sex you have, the better able you are to cope with your, all of our partner's minor issues. And even some of the major ones, depending on how good the sex is.

Exactly. Exactly. And then even almost from like a more existential standpoint, I think that it's important that we emphasize just having meaning in our lives, right? I mean, feeling a sense of social connectedness, feeling like you have goals that are important to you, whatever they may be.

Um, because at the end of the day, the only way we're really going to experience pleasure is if we can come into the experience from a place of autonomy and freedom and self-confidence and feeling like you're not in any way trapped by your shame or by doubts. Um, and so again, it's kind of like just having the ability to prioritize yourself and say, what is going to help me to get into that psychological place, to get into that

physical place where I'm able to connect with a partner, whether it's a casual sex encounter or a 30 year relationship. So I feel my best and I'm coming to that place from a sense of peace and happiness.

So totally, I think that, you know, what I'm hearing you say is there is probably a bit of an overemphasis on what makes sex physically pleasurable, but what is so interesting and something I see all the time as a sex and relationship therapist is there are people for whom the sex may be physically pleasurable. Maybe they're able to have orgasms without any issue or, you know, arousal functions just fine, but they feel kind of empty afterwards. And I think that is where meaning comes in and happiness.

Cause there's a little bit of a difference between kind of hedonistic pleasure and happiness and meaning. And that's where I think how you feel about yourself and how you feel about your relationship and what, just whatever is going on emotionally within yourself and between you and your partner or anything else that might be going on in your life. What, whatever's going on contextually can totally alter the way that you feel about a sexual experience.

Yes, absolutely. And there's robust research showing that if you look at predictors of sexual satisfaction, that feelings of connectedness and intimacy are important. It is, as you said, not just about orgasms.

And you know, that research has been found to be especially true for women who oftentimes, you know, I even did I, I wrote this article for psychology today, a few months ago about the importance of kissing. Kissing is something that I think is vastly underrated, but yet can bring a lot of pleasure. Right.

And it's, it's extremely intimate, right? That is a form. I mean, a lot of people have sex without kissing and that is disconnected sex. You know, it doesn't mean that it can't be pleasurable to some people in some scenarios, but for the most part, it's not.

And so the study I was talking about looks at how sexual satisfaction, especially for women and even orgasm frequency is predicted by how much the couple is kissing during sex. So, you know, I think there's something, you know, that's kind of direct sign of intimacy and it really shows how it's an important element. Totally kissing and just physical touch.

There has been studies that have looked at the role physical touch plays in sexual desire and sexual satisfaction. And they have found that people who cuddle more, who touch each other more tend to have higher levels of sexual satisfaction. It can make a huge difference for people with low libido just to have that physical contact with their partner.

And so I, you know, I get people all the time who will come in saying, well, I'm just not a very touchy feely person. And I'm like, do it anyway, do it anyway, as long as it's like not

uncomfortable for you for some reason, you know, that's what the science shows is that even for people who don't value it, they tend to get a lot of positive benefit from it. Yes.

And you know, it is a fundamental fact in psychology that sometimes our behavior has to proceed our cognitions, which means that sometimes you've got to fake it till you make it right. And it's just, you know, you need to cuddle, you need to touch, you know, over time that will become more comfortable and that will lead to more desire for sex and intimacy for sure. Definitely.

Let me break that down for people. So, you know, as when we're, we're thinking psychologically, we're always looking at our thoughts, our feelings, and our behaviors. And so what Nicole is saying is that sometimes how we feel and what we think may not quite align with how we're engaging behaviorally in that moment, but that by sometimes by making some of those behavioral shifts, eventually the thoughts and feelings catch up and then you can feel differently about yourself.

Exactly. Thank you for translating that. Yeah.

So Nicole, what would you say are some of the biggest myths out there that keep people from enjoying sex? Well, I think one of the biggest myths, and a lot of this just comes from the way our, you know, culture and as we are, as individuals are just bombarded by images and ideas that are being promoted, um, with filters and that just portray totally unrealistic ideas about what bodies and sex look like. Um, and I think, you know, overall, I think that, you know, and I'm basis on research showing that pornography can absolutely, you know, overall, I am not anti-porn and it can definitely help spark desire and help, you know, couples come up with creative ways to get fantasy going. But the problem is that because we don't have good sex education, a lot of people, especially younger people now are looking at online porn and thinking that it's actually a realistic portrayal of bodies and sex.

When in fact, it really is just meant to be fantasy. And so as a result, people are coming into these sexual experiences, thinking that sex is a performance that it has to be like the Olympics that you have to be having 8 million different sexual positions that, you know, as women, that we should be able to have, you know, 15 multiple orgasms from penetrative sex alone. You know, there are all these ideas that just kind of get us in our heads and it makes us feel like we're broken, you know, because we're not achieving these unrealistic things.

And I think that that creates kind of the exact type of anxiety that robs us of pleasure. Totally. And I think on the extreme end, obviously there's what we see in porn, but on an everyday level, what we see, how we see sex depicted in TV and in movies is in and of itself, very unrealistic.

I mean, it's kind of the same thing. You rarely see much foreplay. You see two people

coming together very passionately.

A lot of times they don't even fully undress and they appear to have a simultaneous orgasm in about 10 seconds. And then the sex scene is over. Did you see Bridgerton? I haven't watched it yet.

I know everyone asks me that because I hear it's hot and steamy, but no, I haven't. I can't get my husband on board because it describes perfectly what you just said. I mean, it's a situation where, you know, you, it, you know, it's, it's, I mean, it's this, I loved it.

It's it's light. It's easy. It's a historical place, but it's kind of present day kind of superimposed on top of that.

But it's really like, you know, the main character is this girl and she's, you know, there's been no sex education and she's for the first time experiencing sexual desire towards a partner. And it shows her the first time they have sex, she like has an orgasm within a minute. Right.

You know, any of these other shows, um, you know, I'm constantly being asked when I think of like the show and by the way, guilty pleasure, I've watched all of them. Right. What else? No shame.

I watched all them. But again, you know, sex life, right. I mean, again, entertaining story, really hot, steamy sex scenes, not reality.

Right. We don't come over and over that quickly. It's ridiculous.

I know. I know. I actually thought sex life compared to a lot of what I see did a little bit of a better job focusing on female pleasure.

I mean, you see him giving her oral sex a lot. You see her masturbating and just, I think to an extent, the reverse of gender roles. A lot of times we see men depicted as the ones who have higher libido or who are dissatisfied in their relationship.

And in this case, it's the female protagonist. And I did like that about it. Absolutely.

I loved the show for that as well. And breaking down sort of this stereotype that women don't want sex as much as men. And in reality, when women, and, you know, when in marriage, especially when, you know, children are introduced, there can almost be just because of the way gender roles get broken down in society.

There's like a, a bigger shift in self-identity for mothers almost. Right. I mean, for fathers too, for certain, but a lot of times it's a time when you take a step back from your career, you are focused on, you know, really young children.

And I thought the show did a really good job of showing how that can just, you know,

that's exactly my point in many ways. Yes, it is. I think it's exactly your point.

Yeah. I mean, you kind of, it's like, she's left. She was this kind of young, hot, fun, adventurous girl who loved sex and was, had a lot of pleasure and enjoyed sex and wasn't afraid to go out and have those experiences.

And she was kicking ass in her psychology program. She was getting her PhD. Yeah.

She was kicking ass in her, exactly in her career and had meaningful friendships. And then this new role kind of, it kind of separates for her from all of that. Right.

I mean, it really makes her feel kind of like she has this new role. It's about supporting another person. She doesn't, children absolutely bring meaning into your life, but it's, it's different from sort of an independent sense of meaning that you have and making contributions and other ways that, you know, stimulate your, your, your being and, you know, whether it be your heart or your mind.

Yeah. And I think that that's kind of what happens to a lot of women. So I, you know, her trying to refine that and reconcile that is, is I liked how they portrayed that I'm dying to know what happens in season two.

I know. Oh my gosh. We'll have to have another podcast interview definitely, definitely.

But yes, I think this comes down to how we see ourselves and what our identity is. I always tell people that you cannot separate your sexuality from your individuality and anything that makes us who we are is going to come out in some way through the way we interact with others sexually. And so I do think that a lot of women without even realizing it, give up parts of themselves in relationships or just because of whatever season of life that they're in and find that their desire kind of falls flat.

And a lot of times, as you say, this happens when there are young children at home and they're in that childbearing phase. And then when the kids, you know, go off to not off to college, but when they enter like elementary school age, sometimes women then find themselves with their little more time on their hands and they're freed up. And I'm always like, get back out there and do something that is just for you, whether it is a painting class or a finance class, or just, you know, something, if you're not going back to work full time, because I think that's so important for women.

And it's so important. And I feel like women are socialized to believe that, that, that they should be putting the needs of others always before their own. And I firmly believe that you have to be able to nurture your heart, your feelings, your brain, find something that brings you meaning, just like you described, whether it's a class or a hobby, because that's going to make you a happier person who's incapable of giving more in your relationships and having more of a, you know, libido and also being able to bring more positive feelings back to your parenting style.



You know, I say it's a little bit like when you're on an airplane and there are, um, you know, they're teaching you how to put on an oxygen mask and they tell you, you've got to put on your own oxygen mask before you put on that of your child's right. Your child is not going to do well if you've already passed out. So that is so true for parenting.

Yes. Yes. And I tell that to my couples too.

I'm like this, you have to think of this as not something you're just doing for yourselves or for your partner or for the relationship, but when your kids see you interacting positively with your partner, that is beneficial to them. And it's modeling how to have a healthy, intimate relationship. Yes.

Yes. Since we're talking about pleasure. And since you told me that your thesis was on motivation, can you, can you break down what motivates us, how that works just neurobiologically and, and how pleasure fits into that? Cause I think people might be curious to learn more.

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Um, okay.

Well, so first of all, motivation is a huge, huge topic. So my thesis specifically was looking at how people respond to negative versus positive feedback in the context of their relationships. And, you know, what I essentially found was that positive feedback, everybody loves positive feedback, of course, but in, when, when there is negative feedback, as there always will be, what really helps is if it's framed in the way, in a way where it's not just about you, but it's about being concerned, being invested in the relationship and explaining, you know, for example, you know, we get into, we can get into this negative cycle.

It can cause us to, to fight. I don't want to go back. I want us to be able to break through that negative cycle.

And so I'm going to explain to you, you know, kind of what I would, what would really make me feel safe and loved by you right now. So, you know, so that kind of, of, of, um, I think thinking is really important. And then in terms of how that translates into pleasure, you know, again, I think that being able to give our partners feedback and say, you know, not be afraid to sexually communicate.

I mean, again, like we were just discussing, we're taught so often by, you know, Netflix that we should just automatically know how to please each other, but that's not true. We need to be able to communicate and it needs to be done in a way that's kind and compassionate. And that's, you know, optimistic.

And it's like, you know, instead of you're doing this wrong, stop doing that. It's, can you try this instead? Like, Oh, that feels really good. Can you keep doing that? So I think that that's really important.

And then, you know, just broadly in terms of what, um, you know, from a motivational standpoint, in terms of this question of like, well, what makes you desire sex? Right. Again, there's sort of this physical as well as psychological component. Like we talked about, of course, it's going to be a function of hormones, of course, you know, which are going to maybe create, you know, especially, you know, when you're younger, a certain sexual desire, of course, they're going to be visual cues that we respond to, right.

If we see or something, or, you know, whether it be a person we think is attractive or a site or a memory or something, and then there's fantasy. And I think that fantasy is really important to, to think about, um, Justin Lee Miller has done some brilliant work on fantasy. And it really just shows how I think people are afraid of fantasy because they think that it's supposed to be a literal translation of what they want in real life.

And it's not, um, you know, people have all different types of crazy sexual fantasies that, you know, range from threesomes to, you know, having sex in an airplane to having sex as a different gender or with a gender that you don't consider yourself as you know, as being part of what your sexual orientation would predict, all of those things are normal and you should use them to enhance your sex life and not be afraid of that or be ashamed of that in any way. Definitely. I always tell people that, you know, we all say, I think the largest sex organ is the brain.

And the more you can do to get your brain in gear, usually the more in touch you are with your sexuality. And fantasy is a really important part of that. Um, for anyone listening, I did interview Dr. Justin Lee Miller on a previous episode.

So everyone should go back and listen to the popular episode because his work on fantasy is so interesting. And I think that yes, people feel so guilty about having fantasies. They oftentimes think there's something wrong with them because of the type of fantasy that they're having.

And of course there's always the question, you know, does having a fantasy mean I'm cheating or should I share my fantasy with my partner? And so there's just all this shame and I think anxiety and questions that are wrapped up in fantasies. And I'm like, if we try to cut off from fantasy, I think no other animal can utilize mental imagery the way that humans can. And so if we try to beat ourselves up for that or cut off from it, we're kind of limiting part of what makes our sexuality so human.

Then we're just kind of reducing it down to bodies coming together when it is so much more than that. Exactly. Exactly.

And yeah, I mean, and back to what you were saying in terms of, you know, fantasies where it might cause you to think, oh my gosh, am I cheating? A hundred percent of people are commit adultery. If you consider what the wide range of I mean, even if it's just happening in your head, I guarantee you everyone's doing it. I'm not saying that I

am a proponent of adultery in any way.

I just should not feel guilty. We shouldn't consider that. Right.

We shouldn't give it that label. And you know, there's a wonderful book called sex at dawn that really talks about how we are a very sexual species. You know, one of our closest genetic relatives is the Bonobo, which is I've just recently learned.

It's not technically a monkey, but it's some kind of primate. And I thought it was a monkey, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it, it looks like a monkey.

The point is we used to think that chimpanzees were our closest genetic relative and they are very close to us, but it's actually the Bonobo monkey and the Bonobo monkey love sex. They have sex in every position. They have same gender sex.

It's a very egalitarian society. So, you know, or, or monkey culture where everyone, you know, if they come in and they're about to all eat and there's sort of tension about who's going to get the food, they all have sex first before enjoying their meals. You know, we are meant to have sex for reasons other than procreation.

It is not. Yeah. It's sex is about pleasure.

It's about social connection. It's about enjoyment. It's about stress relief.

It's about all of these wonderful things. And we need to just get out of our own heads and give ourselves permission to enjoy it. I think.

Yeah. I was at a wedding a few years ago and started talking to this woman who was a dolphin trainer at SeaWorld. And so you put a dolphin trainer and a sex therapist together at a wedding.

Of course we have this like long conversation about dolphin sex. And it's the same. They have sex for all kinds of reasons.

They masturbate. I mean, there's same gender sex, all kinds of sex. I love talking about dolphin sex.

So yeah, they, they do masturbate. There are examples of dolphins using sex toys. So yeah.

So you know, hollowed out things, right? But no longer are they masturbate. And there's actually, I don't know if you saw it, but, um, I just read it was actually in the New York times, like a couple of weeks ago that they just realized they just discovered that female dolphins have clitoris. Like I think they have more than one clitoris.

So what that suggests, right. Is that, and the thing about dolphins is that like us, they

have I mean, they, they're not as intelligent as us, but they have complex brains and way more complex than, you know, more simple organisms. And they are designed to enjoy sex, right? There's a clitoris there so that they can be sexual pleasure, sexual pleasure.

They are a highly, highly social species. They are very intelligent. And so what does that tell us? You know, well, actually, if we look across the board, if we look at organisms and we look at, you know, range from most simple brains to most complex, intelligent brains, the more complex, the more intelligent, the brain, the more likely it is to be engaging in these types of non-procreative sex, where it's sex, when the, you know, the, the female isn't ovulating, um, sex between same genders, uh, you know, sex in different types of positions.

So I think that it is time to embrace who we are as animals. Yes. Yes.

Bonobos and dolphins can do it. Humans. I don't know why we have so many hangups. We have more capabilities and probably more hangups than any other species. And then, you know, then the other piece of that puzzle is if we look at hunter gatherer tribes, right. It's, um, you know, what we know is that we didn't actually evolve to have these, you know, unique, intimate family structures.

It really was, it takes a village, right? So you had children and there were, you know, you were not just having sex with one person for the rest of your life. You were, you know, you were allowed to have different sexual partners. Everyone took care of everyone's children.

It really wasn't until the advent of agriculture, um, which, you know, increased the food supply and people moved into these study, you know, which led to, you know, huge population growth. And people had to all of a sudden live in these settled city States that sex became something viewed as dangerous if it wasn't controlled. Right.

It became more of like a socioeconomic arrangement to ensure paternity and, you know, allocation of resources. Exactly. And it wasn't until then that it was this idea of, you know, death till we part.

And then you sprinkle a little religion on top of that, which was really about at that time, controlling people and keeping things safe and preventing jealousy and rage and everyone having sex and every, and all these children that, you know, so we have to remember that that's how our culture is structured, but it's not how we evolved, right. We, we evolved to many different sexual partners. And so it, what that means is that, you know, it's okay to be having these fantasies because it's just means you're human.

There's nothing wrong with that. Right. Because you already ordered.

Doesn't mean you can't look at the menu. Exactly. And, you know, I am a believer in

monogamy.

I am happily married, right. I don't have, I do not have an open relationship. It's I'm a huge disappointment to my students in that way.

But I do think it's, you know, at the same time, like, and you can be extremely happy, you know, I'm here to tell you, you can be incredibly happy in a monogamous relationship, but you have to be aware of, you know, what your human nature is and your human nature is going to be, as you said, looking at the menu and maybe that as part of your fantasy life. Yeah. And I think it's really about taking a look inside and being honest with yourself about what is going to be most pleasurable to you.

And I think that there are some people who are just not meant to be monogamous and, and I think there are other people like you, like me, I'm also happily married in a monogamous relationship, um, who, for whom that is very pleasurable and fulfilling. And I think it really just comes down to individual differences and choice and kind of weighing what is comfortable, what you're comfortable with from a cost benefit analysis. And I don't think that enough people spend enough time reflecting on really what's going to work for them.

I couldn't agree more because I think that your relationship structure needs to be chosen consciously. Um, I don't think that monogamy should be the default, right. It's about understanding, you know, what, you know, who, what do I want? What makes me happy? What, what types of relationships should, you know, do I want in my life? Because if you can't, you have to be able to choose those consciously.

And if you go into monogamy without really thinking about all of the different things that go into it, you're not going to be prepared for its challenges. So, right. And I remember, I mean, before my husband and I got married, I remember like long walks on the beach talking about this stuff because we wanted to be very intentional about the choices that we were making.

And we talked about monogamy. We talked about whether or not to have children, because we didn't want to just, you know, go to what, so what society says should be the default. I think.

So I would encourage anyone listening to, to put some thought into the choices that you're making and really assess what is pleasurable for you. Yes, exactly. Yeah.

So Nichole, what do you think is the most challenging for people when it comes to their ability to enjoy sex? I think that it really comes back to these comparisons that we're making to unrealistic standards that are coming from things like Netflix, things like porn highly, highly filtered images that we're seeing all over social media. And so, again, I think it's about being able to just stop comparing yourself to all these other people and

focusing on your experience, because at the end of the day, that's what matters. And that optimizing your own experience to bring yourself the most pleasure, not using some recipe that somebody's throwing at you that may have no relevance to what makes pleasure happen for you.

Right. Right. I don't know if you're familiar with Robert Lustig's work or not, but he talks a lot about the difference between pleasure and happiness.

And he says, you know, pleasure is more dopamine fueled, whereas happiness is more serotonin fueled. And I think to come back to what we were talking about earlier, it's so important to have a mix of both. And we know that through sex and if there's an orgasm that we get a surge of both serotonin and dopamine.

But I am really of the belief and I can't say I know specifically what the science says about this. Maybe you do that. It comes back to that emotional element that we were talking about, because we know that people who are in close, meaningful relationships tend to have higher levels of serotonin.

They tend to be happier than people who are more isolated. And so I think that that is why sex feels kind of empty for people who don't know how to access the emotional element of it. And I think to circle back what we were talking about in the beginning, when we overemphasize physical pleasure and distance ourselves from the emotional side of it, that's where it can feel kind of dissatisfying at the end of the day.

I couldn't agree more. And I see this so much with my own students because what I see happening is a culture of sort of going after casual sex as if it's the only option. And for the record, I say to my students, there is nothing wrong with casual sex.

That can be an enjoyable, fun, stress relieving experience, but don't feel guilty for wanting more. Don't shame yourself for actually wanting a connection with a person, for wanting the sex to be meaningful in a way that really gets that serotonin and dopamine and oxytocin flowing. There's nothing shame.

I believe it's okay to be needy in that way, to express a desire to be connected with the person and to want things out of it because sex can be really pleasurable in that context. And it does take that emotional side to realize that. Yeah.

I definitely think in the past few years, especially with the movement towards sex positivity, which is such a good thing, there has been such an exploration and focus on no strings attached to casual sex. And I'm with you that I think while there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. And I encourage people to sow some wild oats before settling down that sometimes there is a little bit of either self-shaming or other shaming that people experience for wanting something more meaningful.

And I think we have to be very careful with that because then it's not sex positive

anymore. It's kind of aggressive again, that there's like this push towards emotionless sex. And I think when we do that again, it's kind of like emotions, what makes us so human.

Human. Exactly. I mean, essentially it's creating and reinforcing kind of like a generation of emotionally avoidant.

Yeah. Because it's sending the message that you should be cut off from your emotions and cut off from what you intuitively want. And I think that's, that's kind of dangerous, you know, and I think priding people have sort of a really elemental part of, of, you know, being human.

So totally, totally. I know you're an advocate for sex, positive, comprehensive sex ed. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how it ties into your views about having a holistic approach? Yes.

So I think that, you know, what we see is that most sex education programs today in the U.S if they're offered, they're, you know, it's like, I think up to like about two thirds of states now, about a third of states that offer no sex education. It's you know, unfortunately, even in those cases, it's usually limited to anatomy and that's kind of it. And then STIs and then, you know, you know, not getting pregnant.

So it's very kind of fear based. It's not focused on, and oftentimes there's absolutely no focus on LGBTQI+ you know, issues and identities. And so that again, it's just promoting this idea of shame, that those ideas, you know, shouldn't be talked about.

There's no discussion of healthy relationships, right? What does it mean to be able to communicate in a relationship? There's no discussion, discussion of pleasure at all. Usually there's, you know, the intimacy gets completely left out of the conversation. You're just kind of presented with all the reasons that you should be scared of sex and all the reasons that you should be ashamed with sex.

And so I keep, I feel like that keeps people from again, feeling comfortable and feeling less ashamed and feeling like sexual pleasure is something that they should prioritize in their lives. You know, when we look at countries like the Netherlands, for example, that have, you know, extremely good sex education that is comprehensive and starting, you know, as early as, you know, kindergarten where it's age appropriate, but it's just about, well, what does a healthy relationship look like? Right. And then, you know, continues through senior year in high school where you're discussing these things and more and layering in more types of important constructs.

And I think that without, you know, what we see in those countries is they have fewer unplanned pregnancies. They have lower rates of STIs. They have more women reporting that their first time sexual experience was pleasurable, that they had an orgasm.

So if we're, you know, we have this misconception that sex education is going to encourage kids to have lots and lots of unprotected sex and cause all these problems, but it's actually the opposite, right? It's just shaming people and putting them into denial and causing them to come to these, you know, their sexual experience is not prepared, not educated and less likely to protect themselves. So. Right.

I encourage anyone listening to what I always encourage my clients to do is to write down all of the messages that you got about sex growing up, whether they were messages from your parents, from your peers, from your sex/non-sex education, you know, from your church or religious institution, and just make a whole list. And then in the other column, try it, assuming they were negative, try to balance them with more neutral or positive messages and try to, you know, either work with a therapist or talk to a friend about how to internalize some of those beliefs. Because I think at the end of the day, humans have the right to pursue pleasure.

Pleasure is not something that's just going to land on our step just as we have the right to pursue happiness. We have the right to pursue pleasure. Sadly, we live in a society that puts a lot of roadblocks, I think, between us and pleasure.

And so we have to be very proactive in removing those. And there are a lot of great resources, you know, for doing so, but it's, it's yeah. Yeah.

A long way to go. Yes. To all of that.

And I tell, you know, that's exactly how I begin my class every quarter is by explaining to students, everything, you know, about sex, everything that you think of as being quote, normal versus not normal, typical versus not typical. These are all culturally defined by the family grew up in the community you grew up in the country you grew up in. It's, they're not elemental truths, right? They're all it's all about, you know, recognizing that most likely, if you grew up in the U.S, you grew up with some very sort of shame filled ideas around it.

And that it's kind of important to uncover those. Definitely. Definitely.

Well, Nichole, this was such a good conversation as I knew it would be. So thank you so much for joining me today. Can you tell people a little bit more about where to find you and follow you? Oh, absolutely.

And thank you so much for having me today. This was so much fun. So I think that the best place to reach me is on Instagram.

So where you can follow me, it's Nichole\_TheSexProfessor. And you can so follow me at Nichole, the sex professor. I'm also on LinkedIn.

I'm on Twitter. But most of the, you know, information that I'm trying to put out there to



really kind of help people is on Instagram. But you can, you know, DM me there.

If you have questions, I always love talking to followers. You can also reach me by, you know, sending an email through my website, [NicholeTheSexProfessor.com](http://NicholeTheSexProfessor.com). But I'd love to hear from you.

I love hearing from people. And, you know, I always do my work as a collaboration. I never pretend to have every single answer and information changes all the time.

So I appreciate your perspective. So absolutely. And I'll link all of her stuff in the show notes for today.

All right, Nichole, we're going to sign off. I want to thank you again. And hopefully we'll talk again soon.

Okay, I would love that. Thank you again.