

Dr Tara

Okay. Hello, Dr. Tara and welcome to the show. Hey, hey, so excited to be here.

I am excited to have you here. You, when we were organizing this meeting, we were going back and forth about everything we could talk about, and it was hard to narrow it down because you are such a wealth of information and we could take this a lot of different directions, but why don't we start just by talking a little bit about you and how you got into the field of sexuality? Yeah, it's quite a long journey. So I'm going to tell a little story from like little Tara to now in a most succinct way possible.

So I'm originally from Thailand. Bangkok, Thailand. We live in the city and, you know, I went to an all girls Catholic school my whole life. So from kindergarten, first grade up until I finished middle school from that school, shout out to Santa Cruz convent.

It was a convent. You know, like our principal was a nun. Yeah, not just any Catholic school, like a literal convent.

Yeah. I wonder what she thinks about me now. I got to go back and check out like that school. And tell her what I do now. But yeah, so just to give it kind of like context. I went to an all girls Catholic school.

My parents, my whole family's very, very Buddhist, very religious, pray every day, meditate every day, go to temple every week. Never talk about sex. Never mentioned sex.

Sex, what is it? We don't talk about it. We just talk about relationships and loving other people. We don't ever talk about sex.

So that's kind of like the context that I grew up in. When people think of Thailand, they think of Hangover, the movie. Yeah.

Right. Like crazy parties, you know, sex workers, like sex work is like the number one topic. And, you know, there's a huge industry of like sex tourism, you know.

So when I say I'm from Thailand, people are like, oh, you're from a very sex positive country. I'm like, no, no, no, no, no, no. It's sex positive for you because you visit it.

Right. It's sex positive for tourists because of the tourism part. However, anyone that's from there will agree with me.

Thai culture is very conservative in many ways, including very sexually conservative. So, you know, the image of, you know, an innocent woman who is, you know, just pristine and kind and soft and feminine and is not assertive and is nice to everyone and never, ever talks about sex. She doesn't even know what it is, except for serving her husband.

Then she knows.

Right.

That's the picture of a good woman, you know. So to me, growing up, especially, you know, with that picture in mind, with my family being very religious, with school being Catholic and taught by nuns, like sex is something that is extremely taboo. Extremely taboo.

But as a teenager, like as a tween, when I was like 11, I was always so sexually curious. In Thailand, if you've ever visited, you know, we have bidets. Mm hmm.

And I remember just using the bidet and I love kind of using it around my clitoris, like not knowing anything about the system or, you know, arousal or anything about sex. I just thought it felt good, kind of like exercise or, you know, other things like cuddling with your stuffed animals. So to me, I was at that point, I was like, hmm, I want to know more.

And so at the time, we started to have a dial up Internet. So my whole teenage years is like me learning about sex from porn, but like dial up porn, like not too good.

Not today's porn.

No, not at all. And, you know, being afraid that my parents would catch me. And so fast forward to, you know, that's my life.

Fast forward to like me moving to America. The first place I moved to was Los Angeles. And Los Angeles, out of all America, I feel like is one of the most sexually progressive places ever.

Oh, yeah. There's sex toys stores like in, you know, every neighborhood. There's one in Pasadena, one in Long Beach, one in West Hollywood, one in Beverly Hills.

And, you know, coming here and being in my early 20s, I didn't realize that like, the place where I'm from made sex very taboo. So when I first came here, I was exposed to all these, you know, shops and then ideas and about self-pleasure, like masturbation, vibrators. And then I started also like watching Sex in the City and loving how open and honest, you know, the characters were.

And there were so many different flavors in that show. But I've always thought, you know, I feel like an Asian Samantha Jones. I don't know about you.

I love it.

So at that point, that was like my first aha moment of like, huh, this fits me more. You know, I'm much more sexually curious.

I'm much more sex positive. So kind of started my journey of like the almost like the American dream for 2023 is like me pursuing higher education in America. Definitely love being here.

Love all the opportunities here. Love, you know, the openness and, you know, opportunities for conversations and dialogue like now. Very grateful for this.

I went to a PhD program in Phoenix. So I lived in Arizona for four years. I went to Arizona State University at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication.

So I studied communication in relationships. So that's kind of my little piece of pie in sexology is I focus on communication. And so after I graduated, I got my dream job at Cal State Fullerton as a tenure track professor.

And, you know, my boss, first thing was like, do you want to teach sexual communication? I was like, hell, yeah, I want to teach sexual communication. At that point, I have experimented with many, many things in terms of dating, relationships, sex in my 20s. So like then in my 30s, I was like, yeah, I think I'm ready, I wanna teach this class. But you know what? I actually had another aha moment as I started prepping for this class that like there's so much more I don't know. You know, there's a whole world of like tantric sex that, you know, I was never taught in a PhD program because we don't talk about that.

We talk about variables, like behavioral variables.

Right. Right. Things that are measurable. Yeah.

Measurable things. So I learned about like tantric sex and somatic sexual wellness and all these things in preparation to like lecture and like teach this class. So that was my second aha moment that came along. And, you know, fast forward to now, like, you know, with my very bustling like sex ed social media and the ability to go on shows like yours is I'm just so grateful to be on this journey.

I think it's amazing. You have such an incredible story. I'm curious, though, what do your parents think about what you're doing today? Um, my dad is having difficulties explaining to people what I do.

So he just tells people I'm a social science professor.

OK, that's fine.

But my mom is actually coming around like... growing up, my mom was very conservative. She never talked about sex, never talked about sex in relations to like anything, not her partner, not to us children, not like about movies, not about anything at all. However, she retired and she became like a lot more open and and curious.

So we started talking about, you know, sex and marriage and stuff like that. She... because we're now trying, she is now so invasive.

She's like, what position are you doing? Do you lift your legs up when you have sex? Do you? You know, she wants to know all the details. And she's so excited. I actually... she came to visit.

So my whole family lives in Thailand. She came to visit a couple of weeks ago. So we filmed some TikTok content.

You and your mom?

Yeah with my mom, who like doesn't speak English. So I was like, wow, how do you feel about sex positivity? And then she said, it's good. It's good. I love it.

That is so sweet. Sometimes it's the person you least expect who ends up being your number one supporter. You know, I love how people can change.

Yeah, I think it's so cool that despite the fact that, you know, she was raised just like you in this very sexually conservative, you know, cultural background, that she's there to support you and can say it's great with a thumbs up and a smile on her face. I think that's awesome. And that you guys are able to talk about it so openly now. That's super cool.

I love it. It's not too late. You know, like my mom's 64 and now she's becoming sex positive. And I love it. Yeah.

And I think and I'm sure you would agree with this. One of the things I think is so cool about being in the field of sexuality, to your point about discovering Tantra and, you know, somatic sexuality, there's always more to explore and more to learn and things are evolving. And I think that's part of what makes this field so special and interesting and fun.

It's so great. I'm like, I feel like every day there's some kind of research or an expert talking about like a new topic. And I'm like, Oh, I've never heard about that before. I'm interested.

Yeah. Yeah, totally. So speaking of research, you conducted a really large research study looking at some of the predictors of sexual satisfaction. So I would love to hear a little bit about that from you. And just for those listening, you know, I think there's such a focus on sexual desire, wanting sex, longing for sex, desiring sex, right? Sexual satisfaction is how good you feel about the sex that you're having.

And so the end of the day, I think that's really more important than how much you desire sex. I think like as Emily Nagoski says, pleasure is the measure, right? How much you,

you know, that's really what counts when we're looking at sexual wellbeing. So you did a study looking at some of the predictors of sexual satisfaction. So can you talk a little bit about your research?

Yes. I'm so excited to talk about this because it took years to collect data. And, you know, after we took, we got actually a lot more data, but after cleaning it up, we came down to 5,001 participants in the survey study.

And I want to first just give a disclaimer, it is a survey study. So definitely not causal by any mean, I did run multiple regressions and we had really good effect size. So I like to say that they are good predictors, but can't say for sure that they're always causal.

But with lots of other people's research too, to prove like this is important, you know, so sexual satisfaction, so important. And I love that you started off with like, why not focus on the pleasure first before like, how do we create more desire? You create more desire by having great sex. Exactly.

That's what I always tell people. Like if the sex isn't good, you're not going to want to do it.

No, no. How do you create more desire for something that you're just either not good at, or your partner is not, or you just don't jive well. I can't imagine. I always give this like analogy, you know, I don't like going snowboarding.

My partner absolutely loves snowboarding because he's so good at it. And then when he goes, he has fun and it's stimulating. I'm not good at snowboarding.

So every time I go, I fall, I get discouraged. I like I'm cold. So when he invites me to go again, I'm like, I don't really want to go.

Exactly, you don't enjoy it.

No, right. Exactly. So if the sex that you're having isn't the sex that you want, or that you enjoy, why would you want to do it again? So I really enjoyed studying sexual satisfaction, because I personally was just curious for myself, what are some of the things about me, like, you know, as a person that predicts sexual satisfaction, and something that I can do that help increase sexual satisfaction. So being a communication professor, the first thing I wanted to study and measure was sexual communication, and both quantity and quality. So are you having it like quantity, you know, how much are you having it? how often? And there's valid measurements in that already, too.

And then also like the quality, like, you know, do you feel like, you know, you're able to talk about these topics openly, what are some of the topics that you talk about, and they just kind of check in the boxes. So we measure that. And that is by like, effect size, the largest or the strongest predictor of sexual satisfaction in long term relationships.

So in this survey, we asked that they have been dating for at least one year, to do the survey. So sexual communication is one of the strongest predictors of sexual satisfaction. And I know it is no news for us, because we're in sexology.

But I keep telling people who love saying, sex is something you do not something you talk about.

Right. Well, people have this idea that great sex should happen, quote unquote, naturally or automatically or spontaneously or fill in the blank that it's just innate within us. And that's not necessarily true.

No. And you know, on TikTok, there's this guy that loves commenting on my video saying like, we're sexual animals. It just happens like just give into your animalistic instinct. How do you feel about that, Emily?

I disagree. I think that at the end of the day, we're not animals. We are human beings.

And we have a whole brain region that animals don't have called the prefrontal cortex that gives us the ability to think about sex using higher order cognitive skills that animals don't have. So you really cannot compare the two. Exactly.

And also, we don't know if female animals have orgasms. So like, why would I want to fuck an animal? Sorry.

Yeah, that's okay. That's fine.

Yeah, why would I want to do that? They don't even like, if they don't get pleasure, it was for procreation.

Right.

And, I'm not having sex for procreation. I'm having sex for pleasure and connection.

Yeah. So going back to variables, I was also like super interested in about me like, as a person, what about me can I do to contribute to sexual satisfaction? Because a lot of times when we talk about having great sex, we're talking about like partnered sex. And we're talking about like how good the other person is as a lover, right? Even like in movies, you know, there's scenes where girls come back and they're like, Oh, he was so shitty, like he wasn't good, or his penis size or whatever, like there's many different narratives, but it's kind of a lot of times about the other person.

So I was very curious about like, what about me? What can I do to change the outcome? So I found in the literature, and that's why I wanted to measure them, the three variables that are really important about yourself, that contributes to how good of a sex life you have. The first one is your ability to be mindful or sexual mindfulness. Whether or not you practice mindfulness, whether you can feel like, you know, your whole body during

sex, can you stay focused, be present, non-judgmental?

So sexual mindfulness was a variable that I was really interested in. It was new to me when I started studying it. So after, you know, obsessively reading like four books about sexual mindfulness, one of them is Dr. Lori Brotto, which I love.

She's so good. Love her so much, love her lab. I read her book, I read a couple other books, and then the research, and then I came to realize how important it is for like long term sexual satisfaction to practice like sexual mindfulness and to always feel it during sex.

So I measure that through a survey. There is a scale for sexual mindfulness ability. And then I studied sexual confidence.

People talk about this all the time, like, how can I become more confident in bed, right? So that's why I was like, okay, I want to measure something that is popular that like most people think about. And when I read into sexual confidence research, I realized like your confidence doesn't just come from nowhere. Your confidence comes from your self esteem.

People with strong sense of self, or high self esteem are more much more likely to be sexually confident. Yeah. So then I'm like, okay, then we can't just measure confidence, we have to measure the root, which is self esteem.

So we also measured sexual self esteem. So basically, correct me if I'm wrong, believing that you are worthy of pleasure and being desirable and desiring and so on and so forth.

Yeah, yeah, you are exactly right. And you know, this belief is so important.

And after looking into because, you know, coming from communication, I didn't study self esteem in depth. I do, I did study like correlations between self esteem and other communication behaviors. And of course, self esteem is very important in like effective communication, but I didn't study that much in depth until when I started this study, I was reading into self esteem and how much it affects like every part of your life.

So like having low self esteem is almost like a disease that we should cure, that we should take seriously. Right?

Oh, totally. I couldn't agree with you more.

And I think this research is so important for women in particular, for a number of reasons. One, well, I think both men and women are guilty probably of putting their pleasure in the hands of someone else, right? As opposed to to your point, figuring out what we can do as individuals to take pleasure into our own hands and arousal into our own hands and maximize and optimize it. But I think women in particular, a lot of times

still grow up hearing that sex is something you do for a man, especially if we're looking at like heterosexual couples.

And so women, I think just against the backdrop of kind of gender socialization grow up, whether they're aware of it or not, kind of believing that their pleasure comes secondary to someone else's. And so I can understand how sexual esteem and confidence is a really important variable to examine. So important.

And, you know, reading into sexual self esteem research, which there weren't that much to my surprise, because, you know, thinking like sexual self esteem is so, so important to how you express yourself sexually, you would think there's like 1000 papers. But there's not, there's like two digits number of papers, you know, I would say like 50 or less or fewer. So, you know, aggregating it and like working it through with my research assistants, we just realized like, there's not a lot of research in that realm. And if there is, it's kind of more like conceptual, like explaining what it is and why it's important. So yeah, putting all of those combined. All of those variables are significant predictors of sexual satisfaction.

So you should be practicing mindfulness, so that you're able to translate that mindfulness during sex. So sexual mindfulness is important. Your sexual self esteem is extremely important, which then kind of translates to like the ability to be confident in the bedroom and about yourself sexually.

And of course, like communicating about your likes, dislikes and different sex topics, your desires. So these four are significant, important predictors of sexual satisfaction.

That makes a lot of sense to me. And like you said before, I am not surprised, but I know a lot of people listening probably are because you don't know, again, we fall back on this narrative, this cultural assumption that it should all come automatically and it just doesn't. So what advice do you have for people who want to feel more sexual confident as individuals? Or sexually confident?

Yeah. I love this question. My two main practices that I do every single day are sexual meditation and journaling. And if you look into positive psychology literature, you'll realize that there's overwhelming evidence that these two methods work in every arena. So like if you want to become more confident before you go to a job interview, you can also do like manifesting, like guided meditation.

If you want to have less stress, meditation, you want to be a better mom, like meditation, you know, so there's so much research already. And like athletes do this all the time. You know, you imagine yourself hitting the home run or yeah, getting the hole in one.

You picture that happening so that it's sort of fresh in your brain and in your body.

Yeah, exactly that. So if, you know, these high performing people all around the world already do this, why not do this for our sex life? So I have like free guided sexual meditation on YouTube that anyone interested can just go listen and close your eyes and just follow the guide.

It's only five minutes. It's super easy to start. So try that out.

Sexual meditation is my favorite because it allows me to like feel every part of my body. And then my second method is journaling. And there's, like I said, there's a lot of evidence in positive psychology how much journaling can help with not just your mental health, but like building a stronger self esteem and confidence and also, you know, helping you like understand your experiences at the time.

So I highly recommend like when you journal, try a few prompts that are about sex. Right. Because if you already have a journaling practice, like, cool, that's awesome. Keep doing it. Maybe add one prompt that's about sex.

Yeah. Yeah. And I don't know. You may disagree. I always advise people, when they journal to put pen to paper as opposed to typing it, because putting pen to paper, it slows us down. It keeps us in touch with the emotional aspects of what we're thinking about. I think sometimes with typing, we just go too fast and we're not really in our bodies.

Yeah.

And so I'm a big proponent of pen to paper.

I do love writing. I journal like pen to paper every single day.

Like I do three little prompts and I tell myself like this is this doesn't have to be a huge task because it's like you hear, you know, an influencer on YouTube saying like, oh, I journal every day for one hour.

Yeah, not realistic.

I won't be journaling for one hour, but I can journal for five minutes.

Yeah.

And it has really helped me. And I have, you know, clients that do this and it helps them. And I have my students from Cal State Fullerton that do this that helps them. So I know it works.

Just have to like really be consistent. Like you got to really do it for a certain amount of time. No, that makes a lot of sense.

And I can see how working through those prompts and practicing those affirmations can do a lot to boost confidence. Yeah. Yeah.

So let's talk a little bit about communicating desires. So this is sort of, you know, sequential if we're thinking about, okay, now we feel more confident. We believe we're worthy of experiencing pleasure and satisfaction.

But I think the buck stops for a lot of people when it comes to actually expressing their desires. So tell me what you think about how to help people with that.

Yes. And I love talking about this because it's communication.

Right.

In expressing your desire. I want you to think about it in terms of like two aspects. There's the macro aspect, which is like having a sexy talk, you know, a sexy checking session with your date, your partner.

But then there's like the micro aspect of like expressing pleasure during the time and maybe even engaging in dirty talk for it to be a little bit more exciting and stimulating. So there's like two types of like expressing your desire and communicating for better sex. In terms of the macro part, which is, you know, sex talk, there are a few topics that I think people should never, ever skip and, you know, never too late to do.

I told my mom to do it. She's 64. Love it.

Well, talk to dad about this. She's like, I don't know if he will talk to me. I'm like, nope, you can always try.

It only takes one person to initiate. So I think in terms of sex talk, you know, priming your partner first is always great for like success because you don't want to just mention a sex talk. Let's say here are some bad times to talk about sex.

Number one, right before you have sex.

Right.

Number two, during sex.

Agreed.

And number three, right after sex, when you're still in bed.

Yeah.

Because people are so sensitive and vulnerable during those times. It's just not a great time to have like meta communication.

So definitely have it during coffee, have it on a hike, have it when you go to the beach, have it over dinner, you know, when you're not like having sex or in a sexual encounter.

Totally agree. And I always tell people, you know, sometimes talking about sex can feel kind of unsexy because it's awkward.

It can be when you're just getting used to it. And people always ask me, well, how do I talk about sex without it feeling awkward? And my answer to them is, you don't. You push through the awkwardness. Like anything else new, it all feels awkward until it doesn't. And so you just have to keep going.

You are absolutely right. And it will always be awkward for any other topic. Let's say you get really good at communicating what parts of your body feels good, right? Then you want to start introducing even other kinky concepts to the conversations. It will be awkward too. You know, you restart this kind of conversation.

So I think getting comfortable in the awkwardness is so important. And I'm so glad you brought that up because that's like PSA, you know.

Totally.

No one is talking about sex all the time in an extremely comfortable manner. Even, you know, you've seen my Instagram and TikTok.

I can say those things, but there are topics that will still be awkward between me and my partner. Yeah.

And that's okay.

And I love that you're, you're such a great model though, for talking about sex without shame, which I think everybody can learn from.

So yeah, if you haven't checked her out on TikTok and Instagram, definitely do. I'll put the link in the bio.

It's hilarious to also... entertainment in general. But coming back to the macro, there are three things that I hope that people are talking about in their relationship. The first thing is what feels good for you, you as in your partner, ask them what feels good for you, you know, in terms of initiation, how do you like me to initiate? Like, you know, do you like that I verbally say like, Oh, I'm so horny right now. Let's go have sex.

Or do you want me to be a little bit more mischievous and non-verbal, right? How do you want me to initiate sex? And you know, what feels good for you during sex? If you want to be specific, like certain, like oral, like what, what kinds of things make you feel good, right? Like, what do you like? And then maybe during sex, like penetration, do you enjoy penetration? What kind of penetration? Are there sex positions that you want to try? You

know, on and on. But like basically, what feels good for you? Let me ask you first, what feels good for you? Because I want to know what makes you feel good so that I can be present and be the kind of competent lover for you. And I think this kind of conversation opens up a lot more vulnerability and reciprocity. Right. When you ask the other person first, because you have good intentions that you want them to have pleasure.

They tend to open up and then hopefully they ask you back. Yeah.

What makes you feel good, babe?

Right. I love that strategy because I think when it comes to expressing our desires, we're so focused on ourselves. We can kind of forget what our partner might want to open up about as well. And sometimes I think a really good strategy is to give them the microphone first.

Exactly. And I tell this to people and I completely understand you think, even asking this question, my partner is not going to know what to say. Well, you can ask this multiple times throughout the month, the year, and they will come up with an answer at some point.

You know, sometimes sexual communication doesn't just happen just because you ask the question, hey, babe, what feels good for you? Can you let me know? I really want to learn more about your sexual preferences. Doesn't mean they have an answer right away too. Right.

It may be that they're just thinking about it, but I think it's so important for couples to maintain that sense of curiosity about their partner. And this extends to people in long-term relationships, especially because what I think a lot of people don't realize is that our preferences and who we are as individuals can evolve and change with time. And so it's not a one-time conversation.

It's something you have to come back to over and over again, which I think is kind of one of the things that can keep things exciting in the long run. I completely agree. I tell people all the time, you should have a monthly check-in.

Totally.

Yeah. I think it's great maintenance. The second question or big like over overview driving question would be, what are some of the things that we do now that you absolutely love? And what are some of the things that we do now that you think can improve? Love it.

So let's assess our current situation, but let's start with like, what are some of the things that we do now that you love?

Yeah. Right.

So that will help you understand your current situation.

Totally. And I think language is so important too. Like I always advise my couples rather than saying this, that, or the other are things that I want to change. I prefer the word grow a lot. So I think asking how can we grow as a couple sexually is so much softer.

And for me, that word helps keep an open mind and a sense of curiosity. It keeps the defenses down. When I think about how can we grow as opposed to what can you change? Big difference.

Big difference. And I love that. I love grow. I was thinking improve, but I love grow more. Yeah. Grow is a good one.

I'll be using grow. Thank you, Emily.

Please do. Everyone needs to use the word grow. And you are, you almost like kind of talked about this already, but the third question to ask is what are, what do you think are some of the things that you would want to try in the future? And I think this keeps it exciting and keeps it in the horizon. So no one's surprised when 10 years later a partner is like, I kind of want to try swinging.

Right. Right.

No one's surprised. I think this kind of conversation keeps it fun because you get to be imaginative and a little, you know, outrageous and fun without like, oh, we're going to do this now without like the pressure, right?

Exactly.

Like what are some of the things that are on the horizon? What are you curious about for the future? Right.

I love talking about this. I love asking my partner too, because then we get really naughty and we're like, oh, I don't know. Maybe like after we have two kids, we can like, you know, leave them with the grandparents and go do this.

And yeah. And it's fun. It makes...

Gives you something to look forward to.

Exactly. Exactly. So these are kind of three major questions to ask during your sexy check-in for the macro sexual communication.

I think that's awesome. I, you have such great advice in so many different areas of sexuality. I mean, I could talk to you for hours, I think.

And I love that you gave people such concrete strategies. I think anyone listening to this, hopefully you're taking notes. If you didn't, then go back and listen again and take notes because there's a lot here.

And I encourage everyone listening to go back and have these conversations with their partner. I am going to open up my journal today and add this in because I think it's something we're all guilty a little bit of neglecting sometimes. So it's a great reminder.

Dr. Tara, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Where can people find you and learn more about what you're doing?

Yes. So I have all my socials, but they're all on my website. So my website is luvbit.es that's L U V B I T E S dot C O and all my information's on there. Awesome.

And I'll be sure to link that in the show notes. So go check it out.

Yay.