



Expressing Your Emotional and Intimacy Needs as LGBTQ Older Adults

Advocacy & Services
for LGBT Elders

We refuse to be invisible

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Written by Jane Fleishman, Ph.D.

Let's face it. It's never easy expressing our needs, especially emotional or intimacy needs about sex. As an elder, it may be even more difficult. Here's a thought experiment: What's your image of LGBTQ people having sex? For most Americans, it may be something like this: two hot, young, gay men, naked, well-tanned, with six-pack abs. Why are they almost always white and male? What about the women? The people of color? Transgender or bisexual people? That's part of the problem. Too many people have been missing from this picture. This factsheet is all about sex and LGBTQ aging and the benefits and challenges that go along with expressing emotional and intimacy needs as an LGBTQ elder. When it comes to having sex, "I'll have what she's having" (from that great movie classic, "When Harry Met Sally") may not be as simple as we once thought, but it is still within reach.

A rainbow of oppressions. As many people know all too well, LGBTQ elders face the same challenges as your younger LGBTQ counterparts (like homophobia, sexism, racism, ableism, and classism, to name a few). In addition, there's ageism, an oppression we all have to contend with if we are lucky enough to grow older. Part of ageism is the incorrect notion that old people are all used up, are 'over the hill', and are not needed any longer. The truth couldn't be further from the stereotypes. We are living longer, more productive, more exciting lives than ever before. And that means we're also having sex at a later age.

Defy ageism. Ageism also means people get squeamish thinking about older people having sex. Historically, there haven't been many images in the mainstream media of old people having sex, though that's changing as 'Baby Boomers' (those born between the years 1946 and 1964) continue to age. Older people can still get it on and, in fact, many have more time for sex than younger people. The most current research indicates that older adults in their 60s, 70s, and 80s are still quite active sexually. Most of the research unfortunately focuses on older adults in mixed-sex relationships (Delamater, 2012) but new research I conducted on LGBTQ elders indicates that they too are loving longer and having sex in their later years (Fleishman, 2016).

Sex is good for your health. Having sex may look different as one ages, especially if there are chronic diseases, chronic pain, or mental health concerns. Yet it doesn't mean that one has to give up on sex. Adapting to these conditions can lead to positive outcomes. Continued sexual activity depends on good health, positive attitudes, and access to a partner. Regular sexual expression helps to prevent heart disease and the

complications of heart disease (Ebrahim et al., 2002). Sex also helps to reduce the risks of breast cancer for men and women (Murrell, 1995; Petridou et al., 2000) and prostate cancer for men (Leitzmann et al., 2004). Laboratory studies demonstrated that sexual stimulation has been found to alleviate chronic pain and that stimulation resulting in orgasm produced the greatest increase in pain relief (Whipple & Komisaruk, 1988). Sexual arousal and orgasm can increase levels of endorphins and other hormones that raise pain thresholds, which can ease the discomforts of many chronic pain conditions (Ellison, 2000).

Tackling homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia at home. When an LGBTQ elder can no longer live at their own apartment or home and needs to move in to a new community, concerns about discrimination abound. Many LGBTQ older adults voice fears about discrimination among service providers, other residents, and their family members. This may impact an LGBTQ elder's sexual expression, especially if you are in an environment which does not have a clear policy about addressing the concerns of LGBTQ residents and all residents' rights to sexual expression. Residents in long-term care communities have the right to privacy and relationships. Ask to speak to your long-term care ombudsman if these rights are not being honored.

Adapt and thrive. If you were used to having penetrative sex but no longer feel able to, you are not alone. When penetration becomes too painful for women, it's often due to a lack of estrogen which means the vaginal lining becomes thinner and less lubricated. When men have trouble in this arena, it's often because they take longer to become erect, don't get erect at all, or become erect at a whole new angle. These and other concerns about penetration exist for many LGBTQ adults. Some people give up on sex all together when these kinds of problems appear. Good communication with your partner and an open-mind about what constitutes sex can help you find new ways to express intimate desires and connect sexually. Try changing your positions, try 'outercourse' (alternatives to penetration), try a sex toy. Vibrators and dildos come in all varieties now to help you where you might need them. These adaptations can help you thrive and continue to have sex the way you like it through your later years.

Talking about sex helps. To make these kinds of changes to your sexual scripts takes patience and words. Talk it over with your partner(s) and let them know that you've still got what it takes to have sex and that you still want to "have what they're having," just on new or different terms. It's not easy to talk about sex, we know that. As one ages, the research shows that older adults are sexually smarter. LGBTQ elders have had to face many challenges in their lifetimes. These challenges have increased resilience and can lead to more openness, less self-consciousness, and more awareness about your desires and needs. Even if it is difficult to start the conversation, be assured that you and your partner(s) will benefit from talking openly.

What if you haven't had sex in years? Making your way back to sex can be difficult. If you've lost your partner or you haven't had sex with your partner in a long time or you find yourself being single for the first time in a long time, finding that sexual side of your life again can seem almost insurmountable. Don't despair. Be gentle on yourself and your partner(s). There is help out there for all of us. Talking to an LGBTQ-friendly mental health professional who understands and is willing to talk about sex can open up new ways of thinking. If you're single, there are now dating apps for older adults that can open up new possibilities. If you want to become sexual again, you can. Just be patient with yourself.

About the author: Jane Fleishman, Ph.D. is an AASECT Certified Sexuality Educator who teaches the sexuality of older adults and is primarily interested in LGBTQ elders. If you're interested in learning more about any of these issues regarding LGBTQ elders and sex, please write Jane@JaneFleishman.com and she'll be happy to answer your specific questions.

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