

## What is Sex?

An explanatory model to encourage and strengthen  
Individual physical perception and awareness

### Introduction

Clients' questions about sexuality are usually in need of orientation. Orientation means to explain the foundation of sexuality – What is Sex? – in a simple and manageable way.

This document includes an introduction to the explanatory model to answer the question 'What is Sex?' with the goal of strengthening and encouraging individual physical perception and awareness. You'll find information about hidden codes in questions, common answers for 'What is Sex?' you will come across and why they are misleading, goals of sexuality education and why it is so important to have an answer for the fundamental question 'What is Sex?'. The last part of the document explains the different levels of the model - the head, the gut and the genital level. For better understanding the levels are explained according to the three lights of a traffic light. Depending on the situation and the target group the model can be replaced with other symbols.

### Additional content

**Example Wording** In a separate document you'll find an instruction that can be used when addressing the question 'What is Sex?' with a client. Please bear in mind that the wording and language you'll find in the instruction might need to be adapted to the individual client you are working with.

## 1. **Codes** - Become aware of the difference between the obvious content and the encoded background of a question.

Questions about sexuality are based on the client's individual background and experience of their world and environment. It is important to consider the way a question is asked as well as the content of the question in this context. To answer questions about sexuality comprehensively and target-group oriented, it is highly important not to focus on the obvious question asked by the client, but to take the assumed background into consideration as well. To be successful it is important to have knowledge about the target group and their environment as well as experience in sex education. If the background of the question is not known or considered, an answer might be experienced as insufficient or unsuitable.

The question 'What is Sex?' is hardly ever answered and discussed during sexuality education, even though a lot of questions are based on this one fundamental question:

How many positions are there?

When am I ready for Sex?

How does a blowjob work?

What do I have to do to have good Sex?

Questions that focus on 'what to do', 'how to be', and 'am I normal the way I am' are in need of orientation. Orientation means to explain the foundation of sexuality – What is Sex? – in a simple and manageable way.

## 2. **Common Answers** and Explanatory Models for 'What is Sex?' and why they are misleading

Very often you will come across answers and explanations of 'What is Sex?' that refer to

- the purely cognitive level
- the obvious problem at hand
- sexual actions
- heterosexual intercourse and possibilities of fertilisation
- the relationship level

Very often the answers are reduced to explain a mechanistic act between two people. This can lead to numerous misunderstandings and evokes an undifferentiated understanding and therefore wrong assumptions in the target group.

Examples of wrong assumptions that are commonly held:

- Sex is something that happens between two people
- Masturbation is also Sex – but it has to be specifically mentioned
- Sex is defined through action – that’s why sex is brought up in the context of violence
- It is important to have a lot of knowledge to have sex (e.g. explanations are needed on how to masturbate)
- Sex is something that takes place on a cognitive level and it is important to talk about it thoroughly, then it will work properly (and if it doesn’t feel right, we just need to talk about it a little bit more)
- There are a lot of actions that are considered Sex – but there’s no explanation why kissing can sometimes be sex and sometimes not

### **3. Targets of sex education – clarification and explanation of the fundamental question ‘What is Sex?’ as support for the individual**

The goal of every sex education is to encourage and strengthen the individual’s physical perception and awareness.

The Model ‘What is Sex?’ should achieve the following targets, among others:

- Encouragement of the individual self-perception
- Encouragement of the perception of genital sensations
- Encouragement of individuality
- Clarification that sex and violence are two completely different settings
- Even when having sex with another person/with other persons the focus is on the perception and sensation of the people involved → the gender of the participating persons is completely irrelevant, it is all about perception and sensations
- Encouragement of experiencing the present and to emphasize that sexual promises cannot exist - sexual desire, sexual lust, sexual feelings and sensations drive the actions and development of the present moment. Therefore sexual actions cannot be agreed upon before ‘cognitively’ and then demanded in the situation.

The relationship level plays a major part in almost all current models that explain Sex. Relationship and Sex are two different levels though that can co-occur. Clarification of the different levels supports the process of activation, for example to assess the individual’s potential for development and to consider if questions actually arise from a sexual background or a problem in the relationship.

The genital sensation hardly ever finds mention in current models - although it is exactly the genital sensations that constitute Sex: everyone, no matter their gender, socialisation and sexual abilities can

differentiate between sexual and non-sexual sensations unmistakably. To perceive a sensation in the genital area makes a perception a sexual one – it is completely irrelevant which action or thought triggered it, if the person is alone or with others.

The relevance of gender only arises on a social level which assesses and rates people, relationships and actions. How to deal with this level can be discussed cognitively.

#### **4. The Model**

This described model is one of many to encourage and strengthen an individual's perception. It should – by no means – be associated with explaining 'good' or 'right' sex. It should support and strengthen the individual's perception and never transmit values!

The following is a description of the underlying thoughts. Even though the additional material refers to the symbol of a traffic light, the model itself can be replaced with other symbols.

The underlying suppositions of the model:

- Sex is an individual sensation which is physically perceived in the genitals. Many people feel it as a tickly, warm, positive – in any case easily identifiable – sensation.
- Everyone can have this genital sensation, this type of perception in their genitals since birth.
- The ability to feel genital sensations is usually preserved for a life span – unless prohibited by massive impairments of the nerve tracts in this area.

#### **The cognitive level – the head**

The distinctiveness of human sexuality is the ability to make a cognitive decision to take an action that leads to experience a sexual sensation or to avoid any action that might intensify sexual sensations. This is the reason why people can adhere to social rules in the context of sexuality. People with limited mental abilities might need more support and input to adhere to social rules. This DOES NOT mean that their sexuality is impaired!

Knowledge, thought and morale about sexuality are taking place in the head. It makes sense to deal with these thoughts.

## **The Gut level – where we experience closeness and distance**

The ability to feel a need for Closeness or Distance is also a human ability. This ability is NOT (as commonly assumed) based on knowledge about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ touch, but it is based on physical competence. Only a well-established body image makes it possible to feel closeness and distance. Working with the ‘traffic lights model’ means to allocate a lot of time to explain feelings of closeness and distance.

Practical examples:

Where in my body do I feel if I am sitting next to a ‘pleasant’ person on the bus?

Where and how do I feel if I want to hug a person (that I like a lot!)?

What do I do when I have a feeling of Distance, but I cannot verbalise this kind of rejection on a relationship level, because I am in love with this person?

What can I do if I need an important medical examination, but I do not like to be touched?

To explain the ‘gut light’ in the traffic lights model it needs time and integration in a workshop. The ‘gut light’ should reveal that Closeness and Distance are always perceived no matter the kind of relationship and it is important to show this and act accordingly. Only for medical examinations it is important to step over the limits of the individual feeling of distance as the personal gain (of the medical treatment) is superior. The NO in love is the most complicated NO.

The ‘gut light’ reveals why the commonly used books on ‘How to say NO’ are problematic from the view of sex education: Firstly, almost all of them assume that the readers have an intact perception of Closeness and Distance (which might not be the case for people who experienced violence for example). Secondly, there is no mention of how to react in positive situations – even though saying ‘NO’ is especially challenging in loving, arousing, positive situations when a feeling of distance gets established.

The aim of discussing, working on and preparing the gut level is the encouragement of individual perception of closeness and distance. It can be practiced in role plays and be instructed in everyday exercises. Exercises and techniques of the theatre of the oppressed can support this level as well.

If the head and gut level both say YES - then it is enjoyable to touch oneself, to cuddle with someone or to lean against each other. These feelings of Closeness have nothing to do with Sex.

### **The genital level**

When the genitals unmistakably say YES - and this is a sensation – then it is SEX. This is the same for Sex with yourself or with others.

When this level is discussed it is important to highlight the difference between perception (arousal) and physical (re)action (erection). This understanding can be supported with examples:

Someone who is sitting in the garden and has an arousing sensation in their genital is having sex in this very moment – no one but this person knows it.

Therefore Sex is a sensation that can be intensified, but it doesn't have to. It is a sensation that can be shared with someone else, but it doesn't have to.

No one else is able to say if someone is having sex or not.

Violence is always violence and has nothing to do with sex.

This description makes it obvious that the complexity of a lot of questions cannot be considered – but it offers a fundamental explanation that can be the basis of most open questions.

The model definitively focuses on the individual and NOT on the context which makes the explanation of different models of relationship obsolete.