The 5 Circles of Sexuality

A Holistic Model of Sexuality, Based on the original work of Dr. Dennis Dailey, 1981.

Overview &
Implications for Transgender People


This handout was created by Eli R. Green: www.elirgreen.com
The 5 Circles of Sexuality

**Sexual Identity:** Who we are and how we label ourselves & our desires

**Power & Sexualization:** The role of power in sexuality, including how we learn about sexuality.

**Sensuality:** Using our senses to experience pleasure, physically & psychologically.

**Intimacy:** The exchange of emotional closeness between people.

**Sexual Health & Reproduction:** The components of our bodies and how they function.
When we talk about Sexual Health & Reproduction, we are talking about:

- Anatomy & Physiology
- Sexual/Reproductive Systems
- Sexually Transmitted Infections
- Contraception
- Pregnancy & Childbirth
- Changes Throughout Lifespan
- Sexual Challenges

This circle represents the physical facts of our bodies, how they function sexually, the components of reproduction, the physical changes that happen from birth to death, and the challenges that people face, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual dysfunction, and infertility.

The Sexual Health & Reproduction Circle is the one that most people receive the most education about. Most people learn the basics of anatomy, reproduction and STIs in middle or high school health classes. These tend to focus on the changes of puberty and negative outcomes of sexual activity.
The Power & Sexualization Circle represents both the positive and negative aspects of power. Positive power exchanges, such as flirting, and giving/receiving pleasure, occur between consenting partners. Abuses of power occur when one person does not (or cannot) gain consent, yet engages in a sexual act, or uses sex as a tool to gain power over another.

From a cultural standpoint, the media and advertising play a significant role in our informal learning about sexuality, and use power to influence our perceptions of sexuality.

Most people learn about this circle in the form of learning to protect oneself from abuses of sexual power.
When we talk about Sexual Health & Reproduction, we are talking about:

- **Biological Sex**
- **Gender Identity**
- **Gender Expression**
- **Gender Roles**
- **Sexual Orientation**
- **Sexual Practices & Desires**

The Sexual Identity Circle represents who we are and how we explain and express ourselves to other people. This includes how we see ourselves as gendered beings, who we are attracted to, and the types of sexual practices that excite us and bring us pleasure. It also includes gender roles, which are the cultural expectations placed on us to “act like” men or women.

People are rarely taught about sexual identity in formal settings. We are often left to our own devices to figure out our identities and finding ways to communicate about them. This is particularly true for people who have minority identities, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
When we talk about Sexual Health & Reproduction, we are talking about:

- **Touch/Smell/Taste/Visual/Aural**
- **Human Sexual Response Cycle**
- **Body Image**
- **Eroticism/Pleasure**
- **Fantasy**
- **Attraction**
- **Skin Hunger**

The Sensuality Circle represents the ways that we experience pleasure. We think about sexuality in the form of fantasy. We experience sexuality through our senses as pleasure, and our bodies physically respond.

Body image is the way that we feel about our bodies, and influences how and when we allow ourselves to experience sexual touch. Skin hunger refers to the human need to be physically touched. All people have different levels of skin hunger – some people prefer little physical contact, while others prefer frequent contact (and everything in between).

We receive very little formal education about sensuality, and usually discover what brings us pleasure independently.
When we talk about Sexual Health & Reproduction, we are talking about:

- Caring/Sharing
- Liking/Loving
- Communication
- Risk Taking
- Vulnerability
- Self-disclosure
- Trust

The Intimacy Circle represents the process of becoming emotionally close with another person. This circle applies to all kinds of relationships, including family, friends, and partners.

Intimacy is a driving force behind many of the close relationships that we have in our lives. In order to become close with someone, we need to take risks, be vulnerable, communicate effectively, and establish trust. Acts of care and sharing help to establish intimacy, and liking/loving the other person is essential to establish strong intimacy.

People very rarely have any formal education on how to effectively establish and maintain intimacy.
Regardless of gender identity, a person’s sexual orientation will influence who they are attracted to, and with whom they want to engage in sexual pleasure.
Regardless of gender identity, a person who has experienced sexual abuse or rape may have a harder time trusting or being vulnerable with potential partners.
Regardless of gender identity, a person who has poor body image may be less likely to seek out sexually-related health care, such as contraceptive methods to prevent pregnancy.
Transgender people's gender identity often uniquely influences their relationship with all the other circles.

For Example...
A transgender person may have more challenges when trying to build emotional closeness with others. For example, it can be challenging to disclose, or harder to trust that a partner sees them as the gender they are, not the sex they were assigned.
A transgender person may be even less likely to seek out sexual-related health care, including annual visits and STI tests, because they are not comfortable navigating gendered spaces, such as the gynecologist or proctologist. Sometimes there are not safer sex materials that fit or work with transgender people’s bodies.
A transgender person may feel less comfortable with being touched in certain ways or in certain places. For example, some transgender people may not be comfortable with genital contact, being in certain positions, or receiving pleasure.
A transgender person may have experienced sexual assault, intimate partner violence, or have been a target of physical assault because of their gender identity.
How many other connections between the 5 circles can you think of that may be unique, different, or particularly challenging for transgender people?

There is the potential that every area and bullet point for each the five circles of sexuality may be impacted by being transgender.
What impact do you think these factors might have on a transgender person’s:

- Romantic relationships?
- Platonic relationships?
- Relationship with self?
- Relationship with their body?
- Relationship with their medical providers?
- Comfort communicating wants and needs?
- Comfort asking for safer sex materials?
- Comfort advocating for oneself?
- Comfort seeking out medical care?
- Comfort engaging in pleasure?

Everyone’s experiences are unique, and different people will experience different successes and challenges.
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It is essential that transgender people have access to culturally competent and well trained providers who are sensitive and affirming of these unique experiences and challenges!