

CHAPTER TWO

CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY, SPIRITUALITY, SELF-ESTEEM

Sometimes children are left feeling guilty about their normal sexual curiosity. These feelings may occur for many reasons, and they are not always easy to identify. Bad feelings about sex can come from obvious reasons such as being caught and punished for such shame experiences as touching themselves, playing doctor, participating in sexual exploration, watching pornographic movies, looking at nude magazines, or peeping through windows at siblings or parents. Other obvious ways of associating guilt with sex may come from religious teachings, family values and practices, or sexual abuse issues. Sometimes adults tell children that sexual feelings are evil and evil must be punished. If children are not educated appropriately about sex, and are left with distorted attitudes about normal sexuality, they may very well develop distorted and abnormal practices.

There are many less obvious ways in which children can learn to feel bad about their sexuality. The belief system that accompanies covert experiences is more difficult to identify, as there is not always a real experience that can be attached to the feeling. For example: if a parent is emotionally uncomfortable with his sexuality, even though he appears and behaves as if he were comfortable, the subconscious, unexpressed fear will surface in passive-aggressive and difficult to identify ways. These feelings and attitudes then become a part of the family's unexpressed reality and is passed on to the children. Families' unexpressed and non-communicated feelings and behaviors are experienced in some way by all of the family members nonetheless. The children may be left with feelings of insecurity, low self-worth, questions about one's own identity, or any number of other "problematic" feelings that remain well into adulthood.

Another example of an unexpressed and unresolved issues in a parent that is passed on to a child can be seen where the mother becomes pregnant as an adolescent, and even though her daughter did not know about the event, also becomes pregnant in her adolescence.

Other reasons for guilt and shame associations are incidents of nudity, intentional or not. When a child is exposed to a fully developed nude person, he may experience feelings of surprise or inadequacy, as his body looks different since he is not yet fully mature. These feelings may carry on into feelings of inadequacy in adult life, even after the person has developed fully. This seems particularly true in men, however it can also contribute to a woman's view of her sexual identity. Children, who grew up in families where there is little discussion about sex or there is a competition between the child and parent(s) for attention, find it especially true.

What many people do not recognize is the part that one's self-perception and one's self-worth plays in transitioning the stages of growth and development, and the ultimate strength of one's adult ego. The worth that one senses in his personal self, as a child or as an adult, is the sum total of all of the self-satisfying or self-diminishing experiences

from the beginning of life. Self-diminishing sexual experiences, however, tend to distort the ego in more dramatic ways, leaving one's sense of worth in question, altering all areas of one's life.

The following questions are meant to help identify situations in childhood that have contributed to adult sexual or other problems, or feelings of inadequacy or worthlessness. Most dysfunctional adult traits take root in childhood experiences and feelings. Since many of these events are well forgotten and hidden from the conscious mind, awareness is limited. Concentrating on general events of the past by answering prepared questions is an excellent way of uncovering forgotten memories that have resulted in adult problems.

DIRECTIONS:

After reading the question, write down what comes to your mind immediately. Do this with all of the questions. After completing the entire exercise, re-read the questions and your answers and "think" about them. Additional memories will probably emerge. Write them down also.

The following exercise will be helpful in recognizing sexually based or gender identity problem areas in your life.

What kind of relationship did your mother have with her parents and grandparents? How did this affect you?

What kind of relationship did your father have with his parents and grand parents? How did this affect you?

What kind of marriage do you think your parents had; did they fight; did you resent this; did it scare you; did you try to break up their fights; did you take one side of the other; were they so involved with each other that you couldn't get close to them?

Was your birth planned; were you wanted? How old were you at the birth of your brothers and sisters; how did you feel?

Write about the circumstances of surrounding your birth; family size; ages; financial status/problems; living arrangements. Was there laughter; arguing; depression; hostility; anger; joy?

Did relatives or other people live with you when you were a child; were alcohol or drugs present; any other addictive type behavior; was mental illness present?

Describe what/how you think your family thought/felt about you; how did that affect your sexual identity?

Were either of your parents hospitalized; how often; for what reason; how did you feel about this?

Were you separated from any important family member; did you experience fear or guilt about this separation; did YOU feel responsible?

If your parents were from different religious backgrounds; did you feel confused about this; did you follow either religion; what was taught about sex in your religion; did it contribute to the present view of your sexuality?

What kind of language did your parents speak; were you ashamed of them for this; did anything about your parents make you feel ashamed?

In most every family, each child usually has as assigned task (jobs) that is his responsibility; what were your responsibilities; were they fair; could you do them well enough to please your parents; did you do special jobs for special favors?

Were you an only child; did you resent it; enjoy it; how did it affect your life; your sexual identity; your decisions?

Did your parents seem to like your friends better than they did you; did your friends seem to like your parents better than they did you; if so, did you resent this; were your parents interested in your friends in a sexual way?

Were you named after someone that your parents knew; what was that person like; did that affect you in any way?

Did your parents want a child of the opposite gender when you were born; did they name you/dress you to match their gender choice?

Did your family move often; did you make friends; did you break off relationships so often that you were afraid to get too close to anyone; has that affected your identity or sexual relationships?

Do you remember your first day of school; how old were you; what were your feelings; were you afraid; did it take you long to adjust; did you prefer to play with girls or boys?

Did your appearance embarrass you; your looks; your dress; did you feel different from your classmates; did this affect your identity?

Try to remember your experiences in grade school and write about them. Were there resentments that you felt toward teachers, fellow students, anyone else? List all of the experiences such as fights, being left out, hurtful situations, embarrassments; be sure to also list the fun times; list all the experiences that you can remember.

Do you recall any bad experiences at Sunday school; church; summer camp; did this affect your sexuality; your identity; did you tell anyone; why not?

Were you threatened by the Boogieman or the devil if you misbehaved; were you afraid; does this affect you now; how?

Were you afraid of the dark; of storms; did anything unusual happen to you at night; did you sleep with your clothes on; facing the door?

Were you afraid to fight back; did you fight with others often; did you become aggressive; or passive; does that affect your sexuality or identity now?

When was the first time you ever stole something; what was this in response to? Was it an "acting out" response to anger that you were unable to express?

How did your parents punish you; did you deserve it; was it fair; how did you react to the punishment?

List the feelings of guilt, fear, shame and resentment that you had toward significant people in your life when you were a child; **not current feelings**.

List any resentments that you remember, and the persons or things that you resented when you were a child. Did you resent your church, relatives, parents, friends of parents, teachers, siblings, schoolmates? If so, list them all. Unresolved resentments are one of the reasons that people experience resistance in working through their painful childhood experiences. This can lead to unhealthy communication, and/or sexual responses, and eventually destroy relationships.

Did you remember yourself being excited or interested in a sexual way as a child; do you think that it was a normal response; does the memory bother you now?

How old were you when you first masturbated; were you ever caught and made to feel guilty or ashamed; did you feel guilty even though you weren't caught; what did you know about masturbation; who told you?

Were you involved in any atypical sexual activities; same sex partners; animals; other members of your family; sodomy; anything else?

List any of the above situations that make you feel uneasy now; what feelings are triggered; have the experiences affected your life?

List any other childhood memories that were painful; are still painful.

Which of the above questions about your childhood were the toughest for you to answer; do you know why; are you blaming yourself for the events that took place at that time; how have they affected your life; do you think about them often?
