

## Sports, Sex and the Art of Communication

When I was a kid, my parents kept a copy of *How Sex Can Keep You Slim* in the bathroom. Truth be told, I never even took a peek. My friends' parents hid their titillating books and magazines on the top shelves of their book shelves and at the bottom of their sock drawers. My parents left *How Sex Can Keep You Slim* next to the toilet by the *Reader's Digest*, so how interesting could it be? Besides, the thought of my parents having sex rated high on my ick factor meter. Still, the book's catchy title points to the fact that there are fitness options that don't necessarily involve going to the gym, joining a team or running a marathon. You don't even have to get out of bed to work up a sweat. Given this criteria, we can all be athletes.

Sex, like any other sport, requires a tacit set of rules, common language and a great deal of verbal and non-verbal communication. Most of us learn the rules and language of sports at school, in little-leagues and even at church. We understand that you can't travel when playing basket ball and that three strikes means you're out in baseball. Coaches teach us that "love" means zero in tennis and "strike" means you knocked down all the pins in bowling. Even cyclists and swimmers follow rules of etiquette so that they can share the lane or share the road in a mutually satisfying way. In contrast, other than the commandment, "thou shalt not engage in sexual activities with another without their consent" and a few tips on factors that make consent impossible such as use of threat and/or force, the potential partner is passed out, or the potential partner is a minor, our culture pretty much leaves us to figure things out on our own when it comes to sex. Instead, our culture gives us messages in the form of movies, seductive ads and pornography which indicate that satisfying sex just happens. We assume that partners know what we want without our having to teach them. We trust that they can read our minds and interpret our verbal and non-verbal signals.

Also, like any other sport, sex takes practice. You have to take time to figure out what feels good and what doesn't feel so good. And even though the biggest sexual organ is the brain (the brain is the place where it all starts), sex happens in the body and in order to know what's really going on in your body, you have to be able to feel your body. And just as you wouldn't expect to smoke a joint or drink a 6 pack and still manage to be at the top of your game on the soccer field, you shouldn't expect to smoke, drink or otherwise imbibe mind altering drugs and still know what's going on in your body. Put differently, satisfying sex takes self-knowledge and a commitment to being present.

If you want to have mind-blowing sex with a partner, you have to talk about it with them. You have to tell them what you like and what doesn't work for you and ask them what they like and what doesn't work for them. Part of clear communication is being on the same page. If, for example, someone asks, "Do you like ice?" and you aren't sure what they are talking about, ask. And if you have a question or request, it's best to be direct. "I'd really like it if you'd, you know, turn me on," can mean anything: passionate kissing, vigorous tickling, a hit of acid, a hand job, or anything else. You also have to have ongoing discussions about boundaries. Just because it feels good to be touched in a particular way in a particular spot on one day doesn't mean that it feels good the next, but your partner

won't know it doesn't feel good unless you tell him or her. And if a partner sets a boundary, you have to respect it, immediately.

Talking frankly about sex doesn't have to be an awkward conversation. There are lots of ways to make these sorts of conversations sexy and/or tools for deepening an emotionally intimate connection. Timing is important. It's best to talk about what you like and set your boundaries before you're in the midst of an intimate tangle. Saying things like, "I'd really like it if you touched me here..." or "Put my hands where you want me to touch you" in advance can spice things up. Constructive criticism may be best shared when the iron, and everything else, is cold – over coffee the next morning perhaps.

Sports call us to dig deep inside ourselves and pull out that last bit of energy, strength or courage. We have to find that something we didn't know we had to make it across the finish line or score the point. Sex also calls us to dig deep inside ourselves and face the demons that get in the way of talking frankly and intimately with partners. The intimate nature of sex can bring up deep seated feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear.

Until you move past your shame, you can never be fully present in a sexual encounter. You have to look at the messages behind the shame and dismantle them. If you are mortified about the bigness of your belly, the smallness of your toes, or the viscosity or quantity of your bodily fluids, notice this. And ask yourself what you learned about having a big belly or small toes or bodily fluids. Shame grows in the dark and dissolves in the light. To dissolve shame, you have to talk about it with someone who is compassionate and understanding. Maybe that's your partner, but if you are uber sensitive, this may be a conversation that is best held with a professional who can hold your shame and help you learn to love yourself completely as you are.

The same can be said about a sense of inadequacy. You have to ask yourself what your sense of inadequacy is about. You have to follow the trail of messages that led you to believe you are not good enough and test them against reality. Inadequacy is usually rooted in fear that something bad will happen – you will be laughed at, rejected, or hurt. The first step to disempowering your fear is to ask, "Is this really true? Will I be hurt? Will I be laughed at?" If the answer is yes, this is a clue that it's time to ditch your current partner. If the answer is no, you can explore the messages behind your sense of inadequacy. It might be rooted from the notion that you "should" be able to "get it up" or get turned on anytime, anywhere, at the drop of a pin or that you should be able to bring your partner to orgasm every time. If so, where did you get that belief? And how realistic is it? Do you expect anyone to get turned on with their mother in the room or when they have a grueling deadline at work? Be gentle with yourself. If you feel inadequate because you can't seem to please your partner or they can't please you... well, this is the whole point of having a conversation, so that you and your partner can talk about what you need to make sex work.

At a more existential level, sex can bring up fear of death. The French term for orgasm, "la petite mort," little death, recognizes this. During orgasm, we experience a temporary death of self as the lonely "I" merges into "we." From this perspective, part of the ecstasy of

orgasm has to do with the fact that our pain of separateness dissolves as we merge with another. The catch is that in order to merge with another into ecstasy, we have to let go of control and just be truly and completely present with another person and this is scary stuff indeed.

I don't know if sex can keep you slim, but I do know that shares some of characteristics common to sports that make them great. Sex requires a shared rule book, common language and a lot of verbal and non-verbal communication. Sex, like sports, requires us to dig deep inside ourselves and pull out the courage it takes to face our demons, shame, insecurities and fears. And sex, like sports, requires us to inhabit our body and be present in the moment. But with sex, the practice sessions are a lot more fun.

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