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## In Favor of Casual Sex

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*Sex is far from the primitive, base instinct we are led to believe it is. It's our most complicated human need. Whether in a casual encounter or a long relationship, through sex we communicate our emotions, negotiate power, give and receive pleasure, confront our fears and fantasies, and sometimes heal our inner lives. Moreover, I have grown to appreciate how sex benefits us far beyond its physical pleasure or biological function. When practiced intelligently and generously, sex has the capacity to help heal our emotional wounds and rectify unmet childhood needs.*

Every sexual experience represents a moment of extreme intensity in which our entire inner life our history and imagination is expressed in action. It's an altered state of consciousness in which the past and present, body, mind and spirit all merge to form a new reality unlike any other experience in our lives. It is impossible for any sexual experience to be absent of emotion or even to lack meaning. Even when we feel emotionally detached during sex, we aren't really devoid of emotion. Looked at more deeply, such apparent detachment is in fact a reflection of emptiness that we may feel more generally in our lives.

To understand the truth about our individual sexuality, it's important to first challenge conventional beliefs and values. What lies under many accepted "truths" about sex are in fact deeply entrenched myths that confuse rather than enlighten us. By accepting these myths at face value, we close off opportunities to explore and express the originality of our individual desires.

Among the greatest myth is that sexual intimacy can only exist within marriage or a committed long-term relationship, an idea that has entered into popular culture in the form of the ultimate prescription for happiness. How many times have you heard marriage advocates cite research purportedly showing that spouses are happier than single people or its corollary, single people are "damaged" by their fear commitment.

But long-term relationships or marriage do not guarantee a satisfying emotional life or sexual intimacy. Everyone knows someone stuck in a barren marriage, whose members have lost their autonomy and in which sex has disappeared. Despite this, many of us still cling to the belief that sexual fulfillment and happiness can only be found through commitment. As a culture, we refuse to consider any alternatives to traditional relationships as meaningful or valid.

Yet those of us, like myself, who embrace casual sex and short-term relationships as an alternative know that, under the right circumstance, they can be deeply satisfying and meaningful choices far from or devoid of depth or emotion, and sometimes more intimate than a long-term relationship.

Upon turning sixty-five, I recognize that in casual sex I have even achieved levels of intimacy that were more transforming than in the two long-term relationships I have had. Unencumbered by a complex commitment, the freedom found in casual sex allowed me to move beyond self-consciousness to attain a degree of honesty and authenticity for myself, and my partner, in a way previously unknown to me. With each new experience, the process of discovering and sharing specific sexual interests required verbal and non-verbal communication that was intensely focused and rapidly telegraphed. Self-disclosure and vulnerability were as necessary a part of these exchanges as they were in a committed relationship.

In fact, my experience runs contrary to the belief that commitment and intimacy need to be sustained to be meaningful. Over the course of one evening I have shared extraordinary tenderness, generosity and affection. Knowing that it would end shortly did not lessen my commitment to these values. Instead, it intensified them.

By openly exploring my fantasies and true desires with different partners in a way that was not possible in my committed relationship, I was often able to transcend inhibitions. With each new encounter I discovered and expressed buried parts of myself and, in time, experienced much of who I am sexually and otherwise. I have even had profound, revelatory moments that unraveled the past and showed me things I never knew about myself. I have satisfied unmet needs by embracing those aspects of my sexuality that were deeply buried and, over time, I have let some fantasies go because, having fulfilled them in reality, they no longer carry importance.

Some casual encounters presented the unexpected, both splendid and repellent. Some led to love affairs, others to friendships. Together, these experiences offered insights into the deepest levels of my psyche that have been as rich and transforming as any epiphany I had during my long-term relationships. My sense of security and self-confidence was strengthened as I learned to negotiate all forms of rejection and rejecting someone with whom I was not sexual compatible. And I continue to refine my own moral compass based on the respect, trust, honesty and generosity I have experienced through these encounters rather than on social or religious rules.


Opponents of casual sex say it is reckless. Casual sex spreads diseases. But it isn't casual sex that spreads disease, it's unsafe sex that does. Medicine has taught us how to effectively avoid sexually transmitted diseases. Reckless behavior can certainly happen during casual sex (though there is nothing inherently reckless about it) when a partner's actions are self-centered or abusive or driven by substance abuse. We teach our sons and daughters to feel suspicious, guilty and shameful about sex, and cloak it in such mystery and secrecy that many of us have no framework for navigating sex with openness, appreciation and grace. We can only express our true sexual desires if we are intoxicated and do not have to take responsibility for them.

On the other had, when we do honor and embrace our individual sexuality we can be free to experience its deeper nature and choose partners with whom we are sexually compatible and who help us explore the truth of who we are as sexual beings. Under such conditions, sex is not something one person does to another, nor is it a guessing game. Instead, we become like veteran artists. Our tastes and inventiveness grow more nuanced with time, as does our capacity to support different partners' sexual truth. Through the diversity of experiences found in casual sex, we can discover or reclaim parts of ourselves that have been unknown or forgotten. Fully embracing our sexuality is not a static process, as our desires slowly unfold over the course of our lifetimes. As we continue to explore who we are through sex, new desires or preferences will surface when we no longer require the old ones. We sublimely discover many truths.

Engaging in casual sexual experiences can also help us decide what we need at various points in our lives. What does become clear is that whether we believe that being single or married will bring us fulfillment, sexual compatibility should be a high priority. Some of my patients have met their long-term partners after having a casual sexual experience with them in which they discovered, among other things, that they shared similar sexual interests.

Casual sex can be smart sex, and smart sex is responsible sex. It involves self-knowledge, self-esteem and respect for our partners. We can use casual sex intelligently to learn to honor and accept who we are, heal the consequences of shame and guilt, and celebrate the importance of sex as a positive force in our lives.

- » Read the other side of this debate in Alyssa Siegel's column, [My Father the Ethical Slut](#)
- » Hear Stanley Siegel discuss intelligent lust in a podcast on [The Opening Door](#)
- » Read [Your Brain on Sex: How Smarter Sex Can Change Your Life](#) by Stanley Siegel



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