



A Sex-Positive Approach to Counselling

By *Kim Gotlieb*

Sex Positive counselling expands the landscape of possibility for our clients to explore their relationship to sex, gender and sexuality. Our ability to address these needs can be limited by negative cultural voices as well as our own levels of awareness.

Freud created a revolution by framing many psychological behaviours in the context of sexual fantasy. He is also well-remembered for his therapeutic relationship which was remote in the extreme. He sat behind the client and had them leave from a door in front, so they never actually saw him.

Some seven decades after his controversial and ground-breaking work, the therapeutic alliance is generally formed in much more engaging ways. Somatic Psychotherapy and other well-recognised modalities integrate touch into their intervention options. Many avenues

of inquiry have realised the wisdom of the body and the narrative which can be nestled in the visceral fibre of this vessel which we inhabit.

A further development in the increasing holistic and integrative approach to well-being, includes the opportunity to work with clients regarding their sexual expression, or lack of it, and their relationship with their “erotic vitality”.

Erotic Vitality speaks to an energetic forcefield that should be available to us all the time. It will express itself in our sexual encounters but it is a quality of being which could inform and enhance all aspects of our everyday experience. However, it is somewhat diminished by cultural and/or psychological injunctions against a celebration of our bodies as sexually-engaged beings. The sex-negative legacy passed down by our ancestors, often compartmentalises our sexual identity

into very limited realms of preferences, pathology and specific activities.

What might first present as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, addictive patterns, isolation or eating disorders may have their core underpinning in our clients’ relationship with their body and their sexuality. When we are able to make more space for addressing issues related to the body and sex, it can open up many healing aspects of our clients’ process including renewed creativity, joie de vivre, optimism, joy and sense of well-being.

Sex and sexuality are clearly an integral part of the issues which present themselves in our work as counsellors. Our ability to support clients in these areas will often require us to reflect on our own relationship with these concepts. How do we unpack those forces which have shaped our sense of sexuality and erotic vitality. What can we do to expand the landscape

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through which our clients can experience health and well being?

Our work as counsellors is often referred to as “talk therapy” which can run the risk of deferring to a didactic and somewhat cerebral areas of inquiry. The brain needs to be occupied. However, it is possible to retrain its function to reduce the clutter. Breathwork and Mindfulness practices can expand the framework of our work in ways that benefit our clients’ hoped-for outcomes. These practices encourage one to be in the moment, withhold judgment and notice moment-to-moment thoughts, feelings and sensations, allowing them to pass like clouds on a blue-sky day.

Embodiment and Presence are two principles which can help maintain a holistic approach to our work. Embodiment refers to the notion of a body-mind continuum. The more we can support our clients to connect with the moment-by-moment subtle awareness of their physical body, the more the links between thought and emotion, narrative and experience become self-evident. Presence is the state of aliveness in which clients are tuned into a range of receptors, both cerebral thought and visceral sensation, which provide the individual with a grounded sense of being. This faculty can allow the person to deal more effectively with whatever situation may emerge in the changing landscape of their day-to-day lives. As counsellors, we can also benefit from tracking how much we are in touch with our own bodies and how much we are able to be fully present to the needs of our client.

“A couple’s sexuality often serves as a metaphor for their relationship, so when things are going wrong in the bedroom it might point to partnership difficulties in non-sexual areas.” (Sex Counsellor - Dr. Pamela Stephenson-Connolly) More generally sexual issues are often linked to archetypal rhythms and patterns in our psyche and our behaviour.

The physical and sexual nature of our clients, requires us to step into the increasingly complex subject of gender.

Opening to aspects of gender diversity, gender presentation, gender dysphoria, and transgender upend all notions of pink-for-girls and blue-for-boys. The developing body of knowledge regarding gender and gender fluidity is achieving much around shifting the landscape of this conversation. However, progress is slow and it can be relevant for us to consider the differing influences which may inform male and female youths, as well as many adults who enter our consulting rooms.

Much of our programming around sex is informed by our early childhood experience.

Girls’ sexual rite of passage tends to be more obvious with the moment of their first period, which usually requires them to step forward and communicate around their sexual maturity, in order to procure sanitary products. Girls will sometimes benefit from the feminine principle which is more communicative, collaborative and community-oriented. They are more prone to discuss intimate matters: sometimes with their peers, sometimes with adult women.

For boys the process is typically more secretive, perhaps with a “wet dream” or their first orgasm. This can be a complicated experience layered with shame and/or shock. With an absence of healthy role-models, mentors or narrative, boys generally find most of their sex education from porn sites, augmented by the fanciful languaging of male bravado. Neither of these provide a very reliable, realistic or grounded sense of the landscape of their erotic vitality. There is increasing data emerging around the impact of internet pornography on both sexual satisfaction and sexual relationships. It is important that we provide a space for these matters to be addressed. “We are as sick as our secrets”, so that making safe spaces for clients to share some of their “secrets” can be highly beneficial.

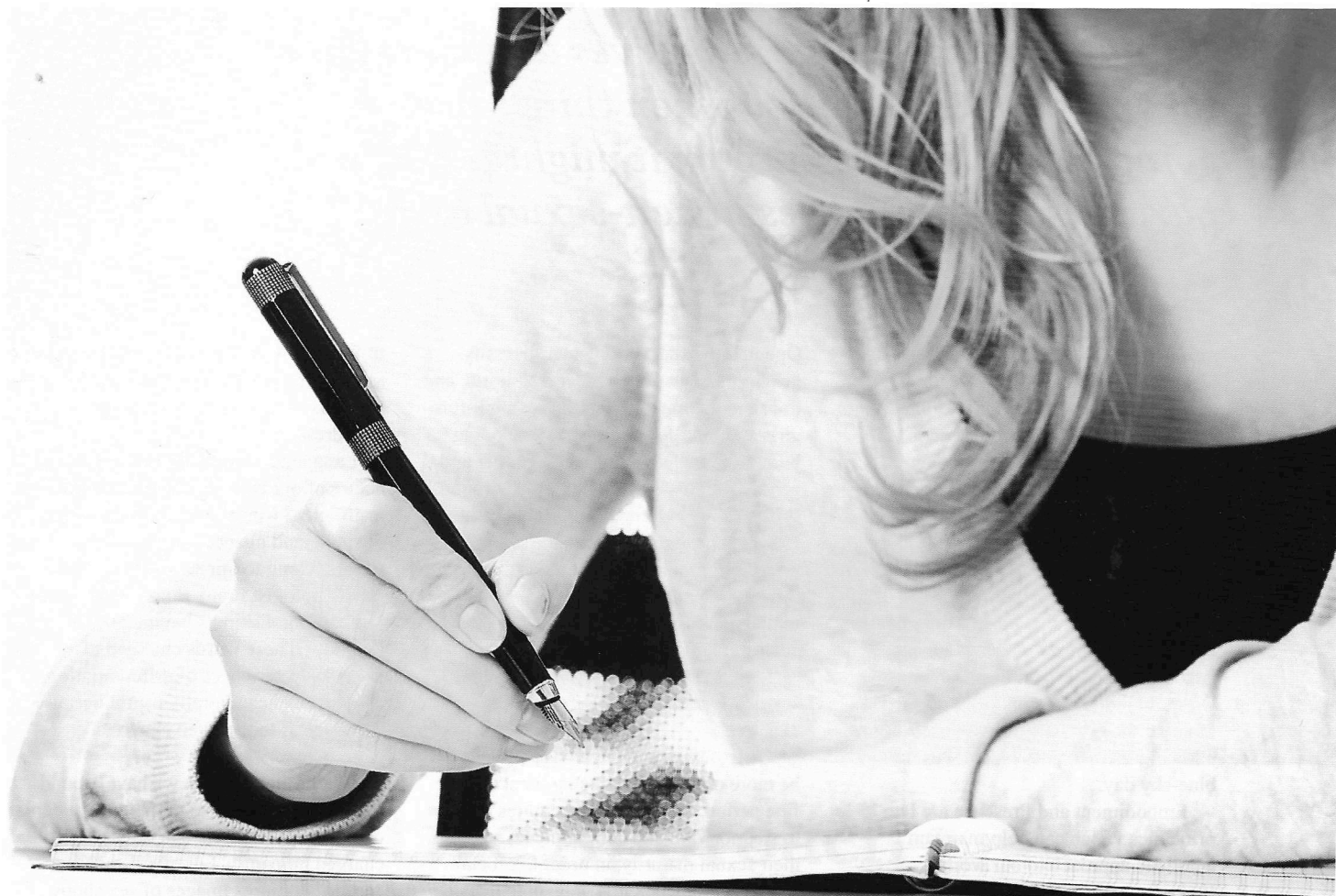
Whenever the sexual impulse unfolds, it has a tendency to play out fixed patterns of behaviour which, over time, offer a diminishing sense of satisfaction and

fulfilment. A good sex life can heal many aspects of a person’s psychology that years of counselling may never manage to address.

Language mirrors the restrictive nature of our culture. There are simply insufficient words to address the range of subtle and nuanced experiences which belong to our sexual experience. Anthropologist Franz Boas enlightened us about the Eskimos having 50 words for snow. These words emerged to describe experiences of differentiation which became culturally useful because they related to the lived experience of these people.

The limited lexicon we have around sex and eroticism also perpetuates a denial of the lived experience of our sexually-charged humanity. For many, the word “erotic” conjures images of sex shops, lingerie and elements of kink. However, this word should also describe the broad nature of our energetic relationship with arousal and its affect on the internal process of our bodies, and perhaps our interaction with others. Sexuality relates to the nature of arousal, attraction, a variety of sexual activities, elements of identity, the reproductive organs, and a raft of mechanical and emotional experiences. Our erotic process moves beyond this framework to hold space for an expanded view of our sexual identity. It makes room for the array of energetic experiences, both subtle and intense, that can emerge in the context of our sexual expression. Limiting sexuality to sexual acts diminishing the range of possibilities implicit in these aspects.

From a philosophical standpoint, there is something of an existential tension when we consider that in childbirth, the one becomes two. However, Erich Fromm points to the potential that in erotic engagement, “two people who were separate become one”. David Deida echoes these sentiments in his groundbreaking book, *Finding God Through Sex: Awakening the One of Spirit Through the Two of Flesh*. These tensions



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will often prove challenging within the context of our sexual experience. They can also play out in other areas of our life and our relationship world. Opening to this underpinning, provide us with additional tools, which can prove helpful and enlightening to aspects of our clients' process. Patterns of behaviour can become patently obvious, when revealed in diverse aspects of their experience.

Trauma, both subtle and intense, is often in the background of an exploration of sexuality. For many of our clients, the innocence and value of their erotic process may have become withdrawn, damaged or distorted through experiences which have left a residual trauma, which requires attention and healing. The ability to unpack, explore and restore healing to our clients' history is an aspect of our work which is so rewarding.

One of the great perks our profession offers, is the level of growth possible for those of us who, as practitioners, journey "with" our clients sufficiently to see the various ways their process can mirror elements of our own structure, both known and more hidden. Process work presents a notion that clients select their counsellor as much for our "broken" parts as for our faculty of healing. We can all move forward in this context toward a more liberated and expressive community of "sex positive" adults.

The professional discourse in our industry has been somewhat muddled by the many examples of impropriety between counsellor and clients. The best defence against these issues is not by avoiding them, but through a more engaged relationship with our own sexuality. There is a challenge in maintaining our professional integrity,

appropriate boundaries and duty of care while also opening to discussing the nature of clients' intimate sexual/erotic experience or the lack of it.

How do we explore blindspots and default behaviours that may be a little outside our awareness? We may like to think that we are non-judgmental, but many responses can reflect shades of shaming that can be damaging. It can be present in our languaging, but it can be even more impactful, when it is picked up by our clients through subtle movement signals: signs of agitation or embarrassment. Lips and eye gestures as well as tone and atmospheric shifts, can communicate unintentional and problematic negative signals which lead to suppression and shame on the part of our clients. Each of us, counsellor and client, have blindspots. In our role as

counsellors, we are called upon to develop single-minded attentiveness and vigilance in maintaining the therapeutic principles which underpin the virtue and value of this work.

Working on our selves


A mind map, tracking the events and influences which have affected us, is one of the most effective ways to explore our own values and relationship with sexuality. On a large piece of paper create a time line. Just begin to randomly fill in those memories, thoughts or feelings which come to mind. Make space to reflect on who else was around at the time, and whether their worldview, words or actions may have influenced you at that time.

As the tapestry unfolds, notice threads of similarity or difference. Where is there more activity and where is there less? Was this a dormant phase or is it possible you have gone blank? What else was happening at these times, which may seem unrelated? Our emotional world tends to favour pleasant over unpleasant experiences. Our memory will often be biased to favour some folk over others, depending on how we choose to remember them. Are the emotions subtle or intense? Be especially attentive to the gaps, or "nothing much" reflections, as they often hold very useful material, when given time to unfold. It can be useful to take time to rest at various stages in the exercise. Maintain some measure of awareness of your body, during the process. Allow the breath to deepen. Be open to emotions and sensations. Note them on your sheet. Exercise self care and obviously seek help if you uncover trauma or other challenging material which requires more specific and perhaps professional support.

This can be a brief piece of work or a lifetime of unfolding. There is a potential to develop a greater sense of the various elements which have influenced your own sense of sexuality: personal, political, cultural, familial and your peers. This will help support your ability to make space for the range of experiences which may present in the context of your counselling or therapeutic work.

Awareness is the key to developing the personal integrity required to expand into this area of inquiry. We all have biases and value systems, and the more we are able to work with them internally, the more we will avoid seeing them inadvertently present themselves in a glance, or a tone or a comment, which does not serve the work you are pursuing with your client.

"The price of freedom is eternal vigilance". (Aldous Huxley) If we are to create space for more freedom of expression around the sexual aspects of our clients' process, we must be ever-vigilant of our own process and the subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the nature of the therapeutic alliance.

Working with aspects of sexuality and fostering a stronger relationship with the body, is a powerful step toward addressing the pervasive cultural shaming that is repressive and potential damaging to the well-being of our clients. As we move forward to a more liberated, sex-positive, expressive, dynamic landscape of therapeutic possibility, we make space for more creativity and higher levels of healing, understanding and freedom for ourselves and our clients. 

BIOGRAPHY

Mr. Kim Gotlieb

I have worked as Psychotherapist/Counsellor in private practice for over 30 years, working with private clients as well as EAP providers & registered NDIS practitioner. My specialist areas are: Anxiety, Depression, Sexuality, Relationship, Trauma & Gay Issues. I have facilitated workshops and group processes in a range of areas; including sexuality, power & privilege, gay & hiv issues. My work is informed primarily by Process-oriented Psychology and Narrative Therapy as well as being influenced by Sexological Bodywork. I am currently preparing a module to support counsellors in working more freely with aspects of clients' sexuality and erotic vitality.

QUALIFICATIONS

Current Member Australian Counselling Association - No. 3003
 NDIS registered health professional
 1999 Master of Applied Science majoring in Critical Perspectives in Psychological Practices
 University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury)
 1998 Certificate In Process Oriented Psychology
 Process Oriented Psychology (Australia)
 1997 Graduate Diploma in Social Ecology
 University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury)

CONTACT DETAILS

Riley St Practice
 Suite 2, 200 Riley St
 Surry Hills
 NSW 2010
 also Randwick location
 Mobile: 0408 652 394
 Email: kim@kimgotlieb.com
 Website: www.kimgotlieb.com

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