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Love & Sex

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Intelligent LUST



Psychotherapist Stanley Siegel's healing perspective on fantasy and casual sex By Diana Rico

Is any area of our lives more taboo, mysterious and misunderstood than sexual fantasy? American culture is downright schizophrenic about this primal urge, seesawing between Puritanism and pornography. One longs to hear grounded insight from a reasoned voice—a voice that helps us to understand the tremendous power of sexual fantasy and maybe even put it to positive use. Enter Stanley Siegel, a New York City-based psychotherapist and author, most recently of *Your Brain on Sex: How Smarter Sex Can Change Your Life*. The clean-cut, bespectacled Siegel believes that sexual

fantasy is much more than an escape or an avenue to pleasure. When it's examined and used in a purposeful way, sexual fantasizing and enactment can actually be a potent tool for healing unresolved issues in our lives, both within and outside of relationship.

In his writings, lectures and teaching, Siegel refuses to pathologize most (if not all) expressions of sexuality and instead argues for compassion, acceptance and deep self-knowledge. This position makes him somewhat unorthodox in the profession he's embraced for 40 years. Last year *Psychology Today* abruptly axed his wildly popular online column "Intelligent Lust" after he wrote a frank piece about how men (including himself) really feel about their penises, and another one extolling the healing and therapeutic function of sex workers. (He republished them on his website: www.stanley-siegel.com.) I spoke with the 65-year-old therapist via phone just after New Year's day. His warm, open manner suggests one of those gentle, old-school professors who surprise you when their permissive ideas blow your brain right open.

WLT: The term intelligent lust seems like an oxymoron. How can something so primal and instinctual be rational, too?

SS: Sexual desire is based not only on lust but [also] on our human need to heal what we are in conflict with or to satisfy unmet needs. And I think that just the way our immune system works to heal physical wounds, our sexual desires are a way in which we heal past emotional wounds. We can't really escape childhood without some conflicts or unmet needs, and often what happens is that during adolescence we tend to eroticize the feelings we have surrounding these conflicts or unmet needs. So intelligent lust is a process of using sex in a way which not only thrills us physically but also helps us heal these unmet needs or past conflicts.

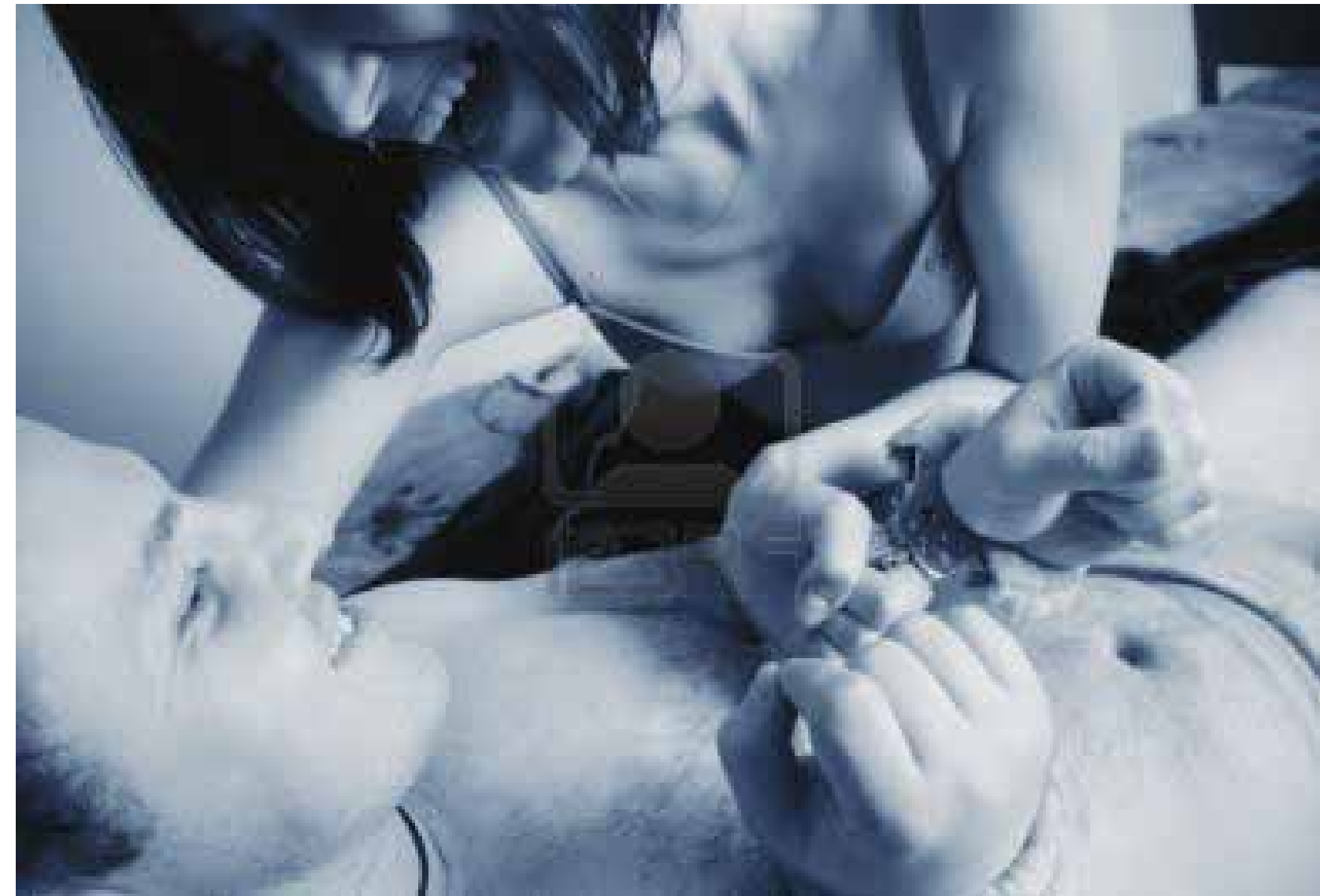
In *Your Brain on Sex* you describe, in detail, the six steps that comprise this process. Could you give us a condensed version?

The first step is to understand what those desires and fantasies are and what the feelings are behind them, and then to learn how to use them to guide us to make choices in sexual relationships that will help us mend those conflicts. Let's say we were raised in a family in which we had extremely critical parents, and we grew up feeling the humiliation of that criticism. By the time we reach adolescence, as a way of dealing with this feeling we might eroticize it, so that in our sexual fantasies and thoughts what turns us on is our humiliation. In the process of eroticizing that, we almost master it; we turn pain into something pleasurable.

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As adults, rather than repressing the desire to feel humiliated, we can further understand it by choosing partners who will act it out with us in warm and loving ways. We can have the experience of the full depth of that humiliation, but this time it's in our control because we create the situation, and we create it with an agreeable, corrective partner.

You recently wrote a controversial essay called "In Favor of Casual Sex," to which your daughter Alyssa, a therapist in her own right, responded with a piece titled "My Father the Ethical Slut." Both articles took a more serious—I would even say a more mindful—approach to casual sex than our culture generally does.



Thank you—I like that word, *mindful*. Casual sex for me has been extraordinary. As extraordinary as the unbelievably exquisite moments of intimacy that I've had in relationships, first with women and more recently with men. In a long-term relationship, while there can be a tremendous amount of depth in sexual experiences over time, in casual sex it's very collapsed and condensed; you're transmitting an entire history of who you are. And there's a total freedom from any future, which has allowed me and allows other people to open up without the fear or shame of the consequences that such profound honesty may have in a long-term relationship. It's not casual sex that you meet someone on the street and you just go fuck your brains out. It's deeper, it's more guided. For me there's conversation before, there's some sort of investigation about what is the possibility that we could create something that could be both satisfying and healing for both of us.

You also edit an online magazine, *Psychology Tomorrow*, which takes a nontraditional approach to psychology. How did that come about?

After *Psychology Today* "retired" my column, a reader said, "You should start your own magazine and call it *Psychology Tomorrow*." I wanted it to be about the art of psychology, not the false science of psychology, because psychology started as an art in the minds of people like Freud—it was all

invention. Now we have psychology that's ruled by insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies. The idea of the magazine was based on the creativity of how the human mind works, the creativity of sex, how creativity is an invention of healing, and I was also interested in the psychology of art, so I combined all of that.

Around Valentine's Day our sex lives get a lot of attention. But what priority do you think sex should have the rest of the year?

Sex has a really powerful and meaningful purpose, one which I think we have to give a lot of priority to. It is probably our most complex human drive. Things like food and hunger are direct and simple, but sex is not what we conventionally think of in terms of a drive. We express all kinds of emotions through sex, from affection to rage. We use it far more as a means of relating to one another than what we commonly or even scientifically think that the purpose of it is—survival of the fittest genes. And I think that's the greatest gift we have as human beings: that sex for us is intelligent.

Diana Rico is wondering if the intelligent lust principles can be applied to chocolate and shopping.