



Figure 76 *Disguised nervousness*

Through her work as a sexologist, this author has found unpacking shame and prioritising pleasure a necessary lesson for many of her clients – especially cis women.

Pleasure Thy Self



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“My Sunday self-care involves a Mörk hot chocolate from my local cafe, connecting with a friend while moving our bodies, and a morning or afternoon orgasm”

I never had an issue talking about sex and pleasure. In fact, I would go out of my way to bring these topics into discussion with friends at school. This was long before I was having sex with anyone, other than myself, but talking about it always came naturally to me.

I didn't see sex and pleasure as things to be ashamed of or embarrassed about, but rather incredibly fascinating. That was probably the running theme of my teenage years; learning about puberty, bodies and sex was just so interesting to me.

I honestly never understood why people didn't want extra sex ed classes or to read the puberty books in the back of the library at lunch.

At that point, I had no idea talking about sex could be a job. I moved for university and was studying dance and psychology when I discovered the world of sexology through YouTube. A channel called *Sexplanations*, hosted by Dr Lindsey Doe, was my first step

into the career I now know and love. I was watching educational videos all from the perspective of a clinical sexologist and thought, “This is it”. It was a melting pot of everything I loved: learning about sex and sexuality, educating others on normal, shame-free pleasure, and clinically helping people through sexual challenges.

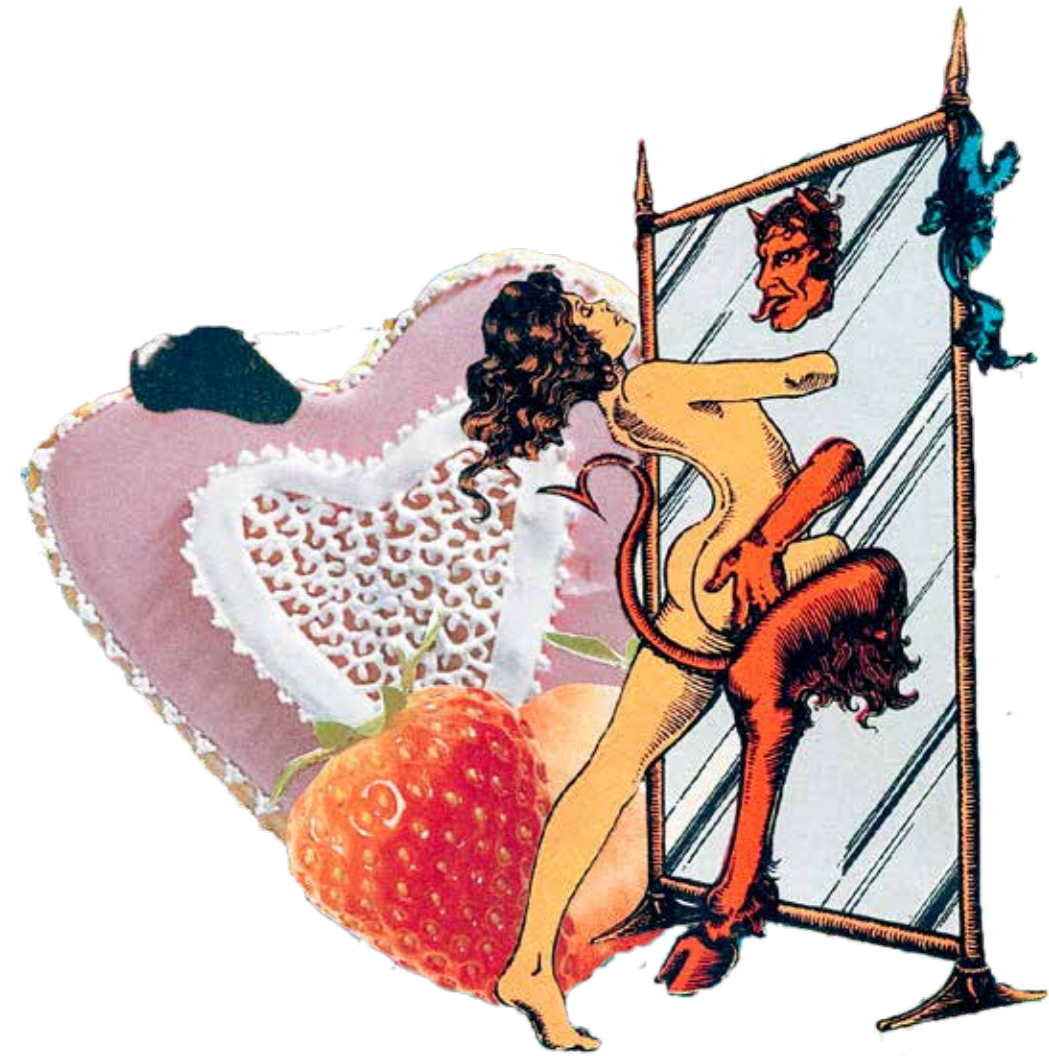
After slogging through a Masters degree and three amazing years in clinic, I'm finally working in the space that feels right.

Prioritising sexual pleasure has always been an important part of my life, even outside of my career. From a young age, the pleasure my genitals could give me was something I looked forward to. House to myself? Masturbation. Can't sleep? Masturbation. Finally got my own laptop? You get the gist. But, when I spoke to friends about this in high school and university, it was clear this wasn't a universal experience, particularly for my cis girlfriends.

Scheduling time to masturbate after morning classes wasn't how everyone used their calendar, but the issue wasn't a lack of planning.

I'll never forget a friend in my first year asking me for sex advice – even before my qualifications I was talking about sex all the damn time – and how to orgasm with their partner. My first question then, and still a great one now, was, “Well, how do you orgasm on your own?” I was met with a blank face, then confusion, and finally a confession that they'd never explored their own body before.

The more work I did in this space, the more I realised how much of an outlier I was. So many people have come to me wanting a better sex life. More fulfilling sex. More satisfying sex. And their most common request is for quick, easy orgasms. While that might be the goal, a lot of those clinical conversations went the same way as they did with my uni friend: with confusion that exploring their body was an option, embarrassment around describing



their genitals, and shame about having any sexual desire at all.

My friend had many reasons for why they hadn't ventured into pleasure on their own, and they all came back to shame. They felt it wasn't something they should do, or was a waste of time without a partner.

As I unpack a person's history during their first session in clinic, I always note the sex messages they've received at school and from family and friends. Pleasure-seeking has often been viewed negatively in western societies. Western religion often links pleasure with sin and even the devil, and the general idea is that people shouldn't give in to temptation. Some of the Catholic school sex ed stories I've heard are honestly horrific.

Then there's the theory of hedonism – that everything we do is in the pursuit of pleasure. While there are many different versions and schools of thought about it, a hedonist is often viewed poorly, and

incorrectly, by the masses as someone who selfishly indulges in pleasure with no regard for others. To be clear, I am a proud hedonist.

While I've seen a wave of self-care acceptance sweep across my socials and coffee catch-up conversations, this view of 'self-care' is usually restricted to face masks, bubble baths and glasses of wine. I have no issue with that going on the Sunday afternoon agenda, but I continue to hear about people struggling to talk about sexual pleasure as part of self-care. My Sunday self-care involves a Mörk hot chocolate from my local cafe, connecting with a friend while moving our bodies, and a morning or afternoon orgasm.

I can't talk pleasure without naming the binary it lives in. While I spend the majority of my time in a beautiful gender-spectrum bubble filled with rainbows and joy, Australia is still firmly sitting in a space of binary genders. The

gender binary plays a huge role in who feels comfortable, or even entitled, to experience a pleasure-filled life.

Broadly, the cis women I see have been taught to be compassionate, nurturing givers and compliant listeners who put themselves last to appease those around them. The cis men I see (again, broadly) have often been taught that what they want is theirs for the taking – that they need persistence, grit and drive to have anything they desire. They saw their sexual pleasure as the highlight of so many sex ed classrooms; their orgasm the key to producing life.

These messages take their toll on anyone's ability to fully enjoy pleasure. The cis women I work with often need space to own their pleasure and work on removing the shame that's been placed on them by others. The cis men I work with need space to separate their sexual pleasure from the toxic masculinity messages they've received. They often need to stop performing during sex, as it is all about how it might look from the

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outside. They want to look and feel in control, aggressive, and like they’re a sex god gifting magic orgasms. Success, to those performing, is about the number of partners and has nothing to do with pleasure.

As someone who spent many an hour on stage, studying to be a dancer, I understand the complexities of performance. It involves practice and rehearsal so I feel like I know what I’m doing in the moment. I need to be aware of every movement my body makes – how my foot points or head tilts. I need to consider how the audience is receiving me, and whether they get the meaning. While I’ve been lost in the choreography before, if I’m in front of an audience, there’s always an awareness.

Sex is not a performance. I don’t ‘rehearse’ sex when I give myself pleasure. When starting to work on pleasure with a client, I often ask them to think through how they masturbate, if it’s something they’ve explored and if it mimics sex. “What positions are you in? Is it a quick, one-minute rub or vibrator buzz?” I ask. I’m not saying everyone needs to start masturbating the same way they have sex – particularly as

some of my favourite positions are impossible to do solo – but rather, not to go into a sexual experience always knowing how it will look beginning, middle and end.

I’m a big believer that everyone should be having exactly the kind of sex they want, and I spend a good chunk of my time helping people discover what that means. I also believe pleasure should be at the heart of it, but that isn’t always easy. The world isn’t designed for any of us to fully embrace pleasure and jump into sex anxiety-free without a decent amount of work.

While it’s not as simple as the movies make it seem, it is doable, and it’s okay if people need some help along their pleasure journeys.

When friends ask what I wish people knew about sexology, I always give the same response: you don’t need to wait until sex is painful, for your relationship to reach its breaking point, or for 10 years to pass without pleasure, before reaching for help. You have a right to a pleasure-filled life. **A**

Lauren French (she/her) is a proud Karajarri woman who grew up on Larrakia lands in the Northern Territory, now living and working on Wurundjeri land in Melbourne. She is a sexologist, sexuality educator and Head of Education with Body Safety Australia. Lauren holds membership with the Society of Australian Sexologists, Australian Society of Sex Educators Researchers and Therapists (ASSERT) NSW, and the Australian and New Zealand Mental Health Association. With a Bachelor of Psychology and a Master of Sexology, Lauren is passionate about supporting open, honest and positive conversations around sex.

