Silent Death of Sexual Intimacy: Ageism in Family Therapy

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Introductions

- Who we are
- Mindfulness Exercise
- What this is about
What is Intimacy?
Silent Death of Sexual Intimacy

- Popular media messages about older adult sexuality

Myths

Ageism

silence
What is Ageism?

Discrimination against older people—has 3 elements according to Robert Neil Butler

1. Prejudicial attitudes towards aging
2. Discriminatory practices against older people
3. Institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people.
Myths, Stigma and Ageism
How Ageism Works

• Ageism can function without conscious awareness, control, or intention to harm

• Negative attitudes about aging in our culture rarely receive social sanction in the way that racist or sexist beliefs would (Levy & Banaji, 2002)
Content and Thematic analysis of NCIS

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPpsI8mWKmg
Significance

- Older adult population is growing in the US
- The older adult population is healthier than ever (Administration on Aging, 2012)
- Still, myths about aging and sex remain
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVgcdULvtX0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVgcdULvtX0)
Discussion: Myths

- Name some myths about aging and sexuality
Myths

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They're not up there any more Walter.
Discussion: Myths

- Name some myths
  - asexual older adult
  - sexually conservative
  - hypersexual
  - “dirty old man”

(Hinchliff & Gott, 2008)
Discussion: Cost of Myths

- What are the costs of these myths?

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KywAyz5plmk
Relationship of Myths to Stigma

- Detract from complexity
- Hinder getting to know others and self
- Inherently carry stigma (example: asexual or not sexually desirable)
Examples

- Complexity of sexuality in older age
  - Challenges (cognitive, illness, physical...)
  - Advantages (higher satisfaction, broader definitions of intimacy, more freedom, less focus on performance)

- Wide variation in experience of aging and sexual expression
  - Cohort effects
  - Individual, familial, cultural variations
  - Regional variations
  - Gender, class, sexual orientation

http://gensilent.com/
What We Miss
Costs of Stigma

Stigma has costs for the person who is stigmatized including

- creating a perceived need for secrecy
- preoccupation with stigmatized trait
- shame
- depression

(Stephanie & Wegner, 2000)
Stigma has costs also for the stigmatizer, including:

- feeling compelled to try to avoid the stigmatized group
- greater psychological distress, in the case of those who stigmatize people with mental illness, so with aging, possibly greater distress associated with aging

(Masuda et al., 2000)
Confronting My Own Bias

- Athens Community Council on Aging
  - Teaching older adults
  - Young expert
  - Fear
  - Self of the Researcher
Pilot Study: Focus Groups

- Sexual education focus groups
- Research with older adults
- What they taught me

- Intimacy defined
- Variability
- Open minded
Examples: Research

- “I am person like anyone else...I like the same things I have always liked...reading, nature, animals...I just wish I could be treated like a normal person ...”

- “I haven’t had sex in 30 years...I was a good army wife, always very independent...then my husband died and that was that...never wanted to get remarried...but I love dancing...it’s a sort of intimacy for me.”
Examples: Therapy

- Assumptions about clients' ability to change?
- Attributions made of older clients?

Case Illustration
How to Combat Ageism

- Redefine sexual satisfaction and sexuality in broader ways that incorporate a range of types of experience, especially women’s experience, which has traditionally been underrepresented (Shaw, 2012; Morganroth Gullette, 2011)
- Discuss stigmatizing experience in supportive venues (Smart & Wegner, 2000)
- Interact with people in a stigmatized group, have positive role models from stigmatized group
Case Illustration

- Val - 91 yo female Caucasian, widowed
- Roland - 94 yo male Caucasian, widowed
Beauty and sexuality

- [Link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Pfa07ijUCE)

- Stigma and body image:
  - Beauty and value of older women
  - [Link](http://artsheep.com/aleahchapins-naked-old-women/)
References


Hughston,...(1991)


