



# Sexual Health in Women Who Have Sex with Women

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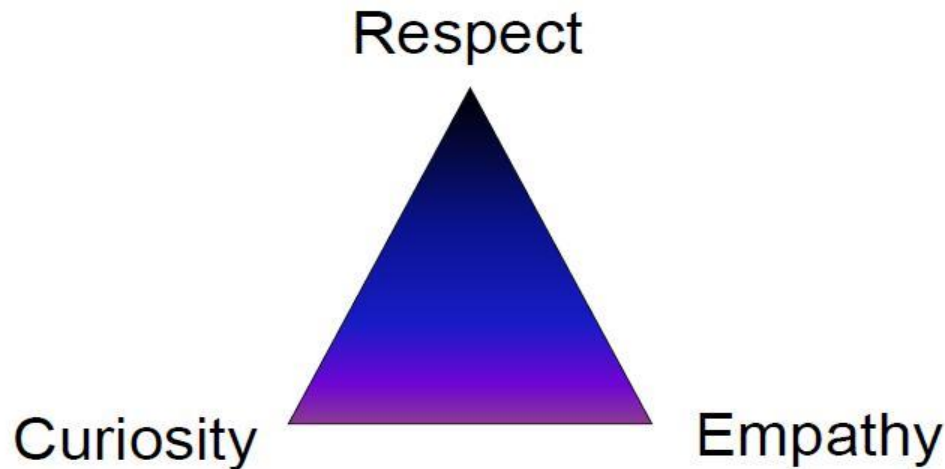
ISSWSH, 2016 Annual Meeting



# Cross Cultural Care

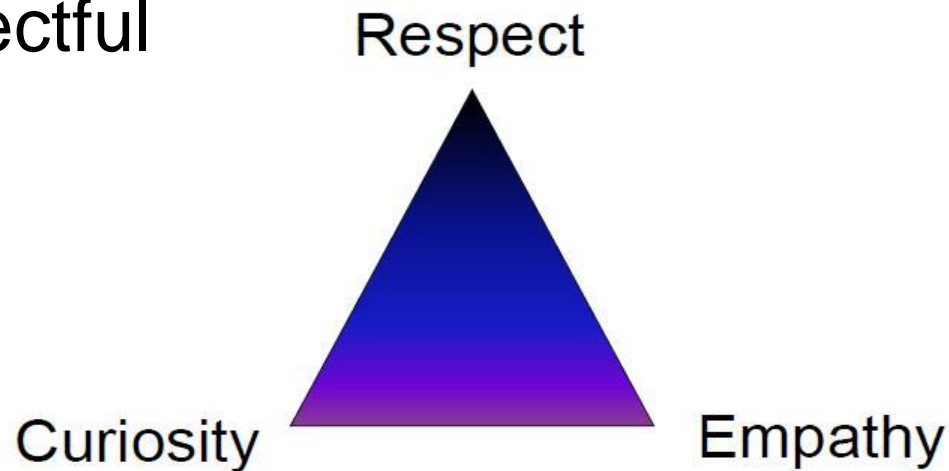
- Non-judgmental, respectful care to all patients, regardless of culture

- Fenway Institute



# Cross Cultural Care

- Be curious about beliefs and practices
- Have empathy
- Be respectful



# Cross Cultural Care

**YOU ALREADY  
DO THIS!**

# Sexual Function of WSW

- Overall, same as WSM<sup>1</sup>
  - Relationship duration <sup>2</sup>
  - Psychological well-being<sup>3</sup>
  - Relationship satisfaction<sup>4</sup>
- There are special considerations for WSW . . .

1 – Armstrong & Reissing (2013); Peixoto & Nobre (2015)

2 - Tracy & Junginger (2007); Bridges & Horne (2007)

3- Cohen, Byers, & Walsh (2008); Biss & Horne (2005)

4 - Bridges & Horne (2007); Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni (2009)<sup>5</sup>

## Case Example - Mary

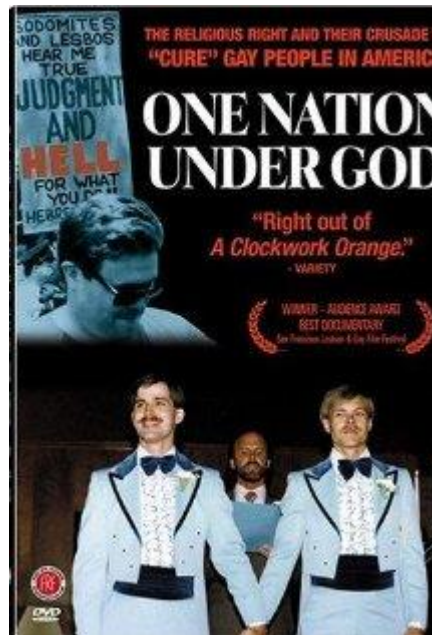
- 58 yo woman
- Identifies as heterosexual
- High religiosity
- 17 year same-sex, monogamous, relationship
- No genital sexual activity for 15+ years
- Relationship discord as a result
- Chief complaint: “Relationship concerns”

# Sexual Function of WSW

- Special Considerations:
  - Internalized homonegativity (homophobia)
  - Social Acceptance/Affirmation
  - Heteronormative definition of sex

# Internalized Homonegativity (Homophobia)

- Negative societal attitudes against homosexuality that a person with same-sex attractions turns toward herself <sup>1</sup>





# D\*A\*D\*A\*T

Don't Ask, Don't Tell



# Internalized Homonegativity (Homophobia)

- Impact sexual dynamic\*
- Not impact sexual function<sup>1</sup>
- Underscores the importance of assessing relationship, not just function

# Sexual Function of WSW

- Special Considerations:
  - Internalized homonegativity (homophobia)
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  - Heteronormative definition of sex

# Social Acceptance/Affirmation

- Impacts sexual and relationship satisfaction<sup>1,2</sup>
- Not being able to show PDA = sexual cost<sup>3</sup>
  - Social disapproval reduces commitment and investment<sup>4</sup>
- May not impact sexual function<sup>1</sup>
- Underscores the importance of assessing not just sexual function

1 – Kuyper & Vanwesenbeeck, 2013

2 – Henderson, Lehavot & Simoni, 2009

3 – Cohen, Byers & Walsh, 2008

4 – Lehmillier & Agnew, 2006

# Sexual Function of WSW

- Special Considerations:
  - Internalized homonegativity (homophobia)
  - Social Acceptance/Affirmation
  - Heteronormative definition of sex

# Heteronormative Definition of Sex

- Penile-vaginal penetration, frequency
  - Not the same for WSW
- WSW- sex is for<sup>1,2</sup>
  - Emotional connection
  - Not as important as romance
  - It's a process, not an action
  - Not goal oriented (orgasm)
  - About quality, not quantity

# WSW Definition of Sex

- Ask about sexual/romantic satisfaction
  - not frequency of vaginal penetration

## Case Example - Mary

- Chief complaint: “Relationship concerns”
- Assessment:
  - Not a relationship problem
  - The concern is internalized homonegativity
- Treatment: individual therapy
  - Shame reduction
  - Education
  - Find a support system that fits with faith



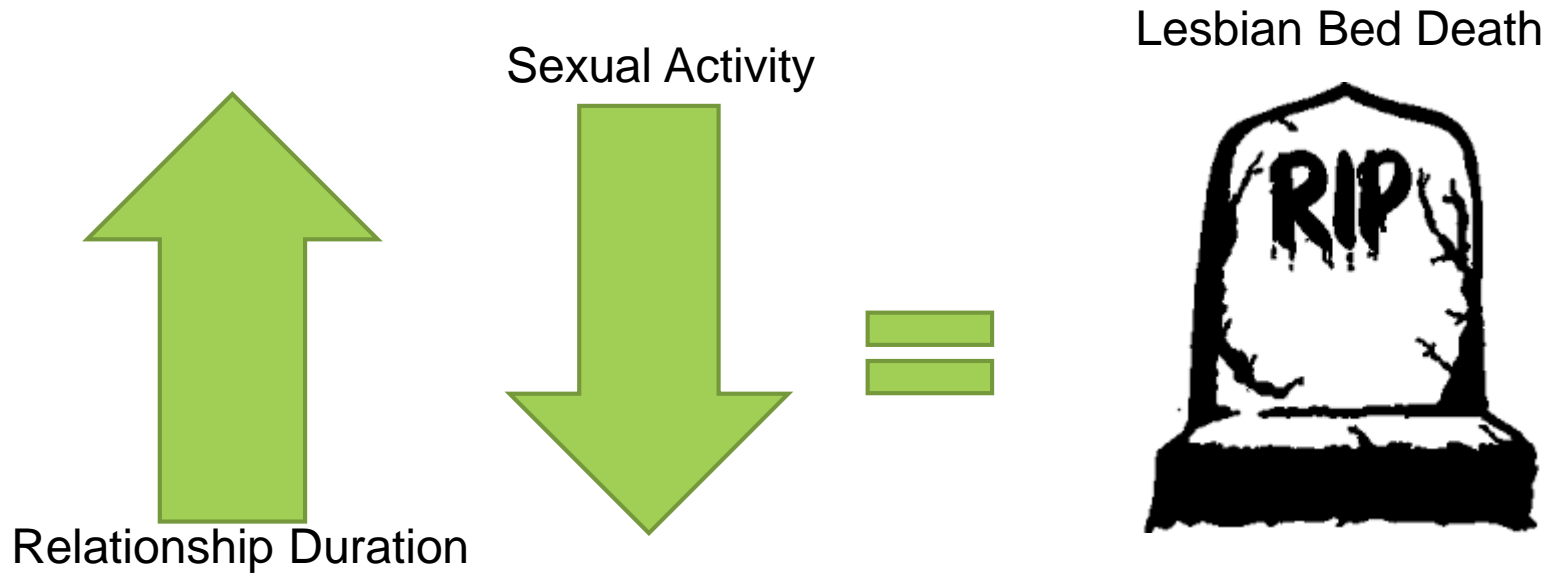
## Case Example - Diane

- 37 yo woman
- Identifies as lesbian
- Out to everyone in her life, affirmed
- 10 year same-sex, monogamous, relationship
- No sexual activity for one year
- Relationship discord as a result
- Chief complaint: “Low sexual desire”

# Sexual Function of WSW

- Special Considerations:
  - Internalized homonegativity (homophobia)
  - Social Acceptance/Affirmation
  - Heteronormative definition of sex
  - Lesbian Bed Death

# Lesbian Bed Death



# Lesbian Bed Death

- Does this really exist?
  - On average, WSW have sex 1x per week<sup>1</sup>
  - Longer encounters<sup>2</sup>
  - More sexual activities per encounter<sup>2</sup>

Lesbian Bed Death



1 – Bryant & Demian, 1994; Cohen & Byers, 2013; Matthews, Tartaro & Hughes, 2003, 2006; Nichols, 2004  
2- Blair & Pukall, 2014; Breyer et al., 2010, Cohen, Byers & Walsh, 2008; Nichols, 2004

# Urge to Merge

- What does a lesbian bring on a second date?



# Urge to Merge

Women are nurturers



Two women = double nurturer



Lesbian Bed Death



# Urge to Merge

- Fusion: inclusion of partner within self-concept
  - No difference between WSW, MSM, WSM<sup>1</sup>
  - However, WSW 2x more likely to desire less closeness in relationship!
    - WSW sensitive to threat of fusion?
- Closeness
  - More close = more satisfied among WSW<sup>2</sup>

# Urge to Merge

- Does this really exist?



- Problem is when actual and ideal closeness are discrepant<sup>1</sup>



## Case Example - Diane

- Chief complaint: “Low sexual desire”
- Assessment:
  - Desire intact
  - Appears she no longer wants to be in a romantic relationship with her partner
- Treatment:
  - Individual therapy to help Diane decide her next steps

# Clinical Take Home

- Sexual function no different than WSM
- Assess sexual/romantic satisfaction
  - Not penetration frequency
- Don't forget to assess sexual relationship!
  - Internalized homonegativity
  - Lack of social acceptance
- No support for lesbian bed death and U-haul
- Use the foundation of cross cultural care

# THANK YOU!

Any questions?

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