The Case for Sex Positivity

It’s time for black women to learn to be as sexual—or as chaste—as they please without fear of embarrassment or judgment. By Feminista Jones
PLEASE, BABY, PLEASE

“I’m not a one-man woman,” admits Nola Darling (Tracy Camilla Johns), the protagonist in Spike Lee’s 1986 She’s Gotta Have It, to suitor Jamie Overstreet (Tommy Redmond Hicks).
By the time I first heard the term “sex positive” as an undergraduate during a women’s studies class, I had already embraced the idea that sex should be a healthy, enjoyable experience. But I hadn’t yet found the language to describe my thoughts. Fifteen years later, the word appears at the center of debate on my social media timelines. And one thing is clear: Many of our people could use a little help understanding just what it means. Sisters, pull up a seat.

Being sex positive means advocating for safety and consent, and refraining from making harsh judgments about the personal choices of others, which may include their desire to remain abstinent or celibate. It means accepting that not everyone else need positive sexual self-awareness. “Growing up in an extremely religious environment, sexuality was presented to me as a gift to my future husband rather than something for me to own or enjoy,” says Dione,* a 39-year-old divorced mother of two. “But when I decided that I was ready to have sex [again], with or without a husband, it was my choice and on my terms, and it felt right.”

**LET’S TALK ABOUT S-E-X, PLEASE**

Emerging from the 1980s as part of the larger feminist movement, sex positivity has since energized people to accept all sexual identities and orientations as normal and healthy. Pop icons such as Janet Jackson and Grace Jones helped bring women’s sexuality into the mainstream with provocative songs including “Someday Is Tonight” and “Pull Up to the Bumper.” “Being sex positive allows people to explore their bodies and sexual feelings and experiences with-out judgment, and to promote a positive experience,” says Vanessa Torres, M.A., a Seattle-based researcher who specializes in human sexuality. Today, sex-positive activists advocate for safer sex and greater access to sex education while inspiring people to empower themselves by expanding their own knowledge and experiences.

Sex-positive activists also support those who have suffered physical, psychological and/or emotional abuse endorsed by longstanding unhealthy cultural attitudes about sex. Sexual assault is but one example of the consequences of these negative norms. Much of sex-positive work is proactive, and the goal is to change an entire community. “You can have conversations [about sex] that aren’t vulgar,” says Torres, whose work often focuses on young Black and Latina women. She believes these frank discussions “will put younger people at way less risk.” Changing the dialog lifts people’s comfort levels and prompts them to communicate their sexual wants and needs, affirming their freedom to say yes and no when necessary.

“Women have to grow beyond the idea that sex happens to us,” offers Twanna Hines, M.S., a sex educator and blogger at FunkyBrownChick.com. “One of the most damaging ideas is that having sex other than under narrow, specific or [socially] approved circumstances is shameful. Because of double standards, women are more likely to shoulder the burden of self-reproach. We believe we should instead think of sexuality as something we share with others and ourselves. Secrecy and taboos only hamper our abilities to explore and gain deeper knowledge of our bodies,” she explains.

**TOWARD A [MORE] POSITIVE FUTURE**

A shift in how girls and women think about their bodies can contribute to increasing positive sexual candidness. Like Jackson and Jones before them, megastars Beyoncé and Rihanna exhibit fierce confidence that inspires many younger women to be brave and bold in their sexual self-expressions. And because of the frequent posts on Twitter and Facebook that showcase diverse points of view about sex, younger people now have access to information often inaccessible to them at school or with their families.

As parents, we should discourage our children from thinking of sex as “dirty,” and instead persuade them to recognize it as something to enjoy when they’re old enough to consent and when the time is right. “How we’re parented as children often reflects how we parent as adults,” says Airlial Clark, parenting coach and sexual health expert at the Interchange Counseling Institute in San Francisco. At TheSex-PositiveParent.com, Clark offers workshops on creating safe spaces and openness about sex and sexuality for their children. “The dialog has to be open all the time because we can’t control how other people treat our children when we’re not around,” she stresses.

*Name has been changed

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City in the 1980s, my mother spoke bluntly with me about sex and the diversity of human sexuality. Her openness shaped my views into adulthood.

Sex positivity is important for people of all identities, but I am particularly passionate about Black women embracing these values. Because we are consistently subjected to unhealthy messages surrounding our sexuality and routinely discouraged from discussing sex—often by our own friends, families and spiritual leaders—Black women more than anyone else need positive sexual self-awareness. “Growing up in an extremely religious environment, sexuality was presented to me as a gift to my future husband rather than something for me to own or enjoy,” says Dione,* a 39-year-old divorced mother of two. “But when I decided that I was ready to have sex [again], with or without a husband, it was my choice and on my terms, and it felt right.”

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**PLEASURE PRINCIPALS**

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101