

Sex Recession: Why Isn't Everyone Doing It?

Amanda Mull: Okay. Thank you all for coming.

Amanda Mull: Uh, for since time immemorial, uh, parent's religious organizations, public health officials and generalized skulls have been trying to find a way to stop young people from having sex. Uh, now it appears is they might've been a little bit too successful, uh, over the past 20 years. Uh, and especially recently, uh, rates of, uh, of sex among adolescents as in people in their early twenties, as well as, uh, have gone down as well as the age of first sexual contact have gone up. Uh, so today we're here to talk about, uh, the implications of that, whether it's good, whether it's bad, and why it might be happening. Uh, I'm Amanda Mall. I'm a staff writer at the Atlantic and I'm going to be your moderator tonight. Uh, first we have, uh, Debbie Herbenick who is an author, a sex educator, educator and professor at Indiana University School of Public Health and also the director of the Center for sexual health.

Amanda Mull: And she, uh, has done a ton of research on this topic. Next to her, we have Kate Julian, a senior editor at the Atlantic magazine who wrote our December, 2018 cover story, the sex recession, uh, based on a lot of Debbie's research. Uh, and then finally a man who for many of you I'm sure needs no introduction. And we have Dan savage, a, a, a tenured, uh, sexy relationship calling us a, at the stranger in Seattle. He write savage love and he also host the savage Lovecast. Thank you all for being here. Thank you. Uh, well first I want to know how do we know how much sex people are having? How do we figure that out? It's such a private thing. Yeah. So we, we asked them, so, um, our team and I grew with lie. Yeah.

Debby Herbenick: Um, so all around the world there are people like me who do, um, what are called population level health surveys. And we do surveys about sex. And so we ask all kinds of things about, um, who's having sex, at what ages, how many partners, all of that. Um, so, um, people have been doing this again in many countries, especially many industrialized countries like the United States, the UK, Finland, Australia and France. And what has come up is that at least some of these studies, I'm not all show some declines in sex among certain age groups. Um, and that's what, yeah, it has sort of gotten us all here today.

Amanda Mull: Okay. Um, what kind of decline or we see how much is it, what age groups is it affecting? Is it a US thing? Is it international? What's the exact phenomenon we're dealing with here? Yeah,

Debby Herbenick: so it uh, is a US thing. It's also an other industrialized country thing. There are some countries within Africa that are showing increases in certain age groups that we think is because of better health, especially better treatment for HIV specifically. So healthier, um, you know, being, being better able to have sex and do a bunch of other things too. Um, and I think of the other countries, it's

really sort of tricky, right? I mean, you're seeing some declines in some countries, mainly among adolescents. Other countries might have declined or among the 18 to 24 year old groups, but they're, you know, again, it's like the slightly different patterns depending on the country, but yes, that, you know, more of a decline and not an increase in any of these countries. Uh, like I mentioned in the Intro ages of public health campaigns and your religious

Kate Julian: rules have tried to discouraged adolescents and young people from having sex too early. Uh,

Debby Herbenick: have those and those campaigns have had anything to do with this or the is, are these numbers that success in a certain,

Kate Julian: this certain sense? Well, some aspects of this are clearly positive, right? I mean the US has long had a really problematically high teen pregnancy rate and it's still much higher than it should be and higher than it is in many other wealthy countries. But it's in a historic, modern low, um, since the 90s. I think it's like a third of what it was. And when it started to decline in the late nineties, nobody really could figure out what was going on. Everybody was really happy about it. This was great news, contraceptive access advocates that it was because people were using contraception more and that was partially true but didn't really tell the whole story. Abstinence advocates said it's the abstinence education and subsequent research has been worn that out and it starts to look like this might be an example of something good that's happening for maybe some not so good reasons.

Kate Julian: Quite a bit of research recently has looked at the way adolescents is changing and finds the teenagers are doing a whole lot of things that are associated with adulthood. Last, so drinking alcohol, working outside the home for pay less, getting driver's licenses lapse, which actually might be sort of relevant here because guess what teenagers have always done in cars and if you look to countries like the Netherlands that have looked at teenage experiences really closely, they found increases in the age at which kids are not only having sex but doing other things like holding hands or kissing for the first time. And some observers, particularly in the Netherlands, are really troubled by this because they say, look, like if people aren't doing these things that reflect connection with other people broadly, are they not getting certain experience they need for adulthood more broadly? Right.

Dan Savage: They're not preparing for adulthood. My observation when you came on my podcast, I think we talked about this, uh, was that I looked at this research and what people were saying about how a young people are waiting to become sexually active, waiting to have their first relationships, um, until later in their adolescence or into their twenties. And this to me sounds a lot like what it meant to be gay forever because our straight siblings and were dating in middle school and dating in high school and encouraged to date in middle school and high school, um, by, not just by the culture, but even by their parents. Uh,

whereas if you were gay, you didn't do that. You didn't date in high school or Middle School, you edited the student newspaper and you edited the year.

Debby Herbenick: Okay. We're in the place.

Dan Savage: And so we would, you know, it's very common for gay people and Lesbian people to have their first relationships in college, uh, in their late, late teens, early twenties and you know, 30, 40 years ago when it was much more common for gay people to come out after college to have those first relationships in young adulthood, you know, 24, 25 years old and to have to make all the mistakes at 24 that your siblings made it 14 and learn all the same lessons and try to make up for that ground at the, at a time when it was more perilous to make those mistakes because you didn't have parental help or intervention if you needed it. You also had your own apartment, a car and a credit card, you get a lot more trouble. But we managed to make that work. And so when I hear about, you know, people are delaying their getting started in relationships later, I don't think, oh my God, this is a disaster. I think welcome to being gay.

Debby Herbenick: Yeah, it'll work out for you. It worked out for us.

Debby Herbenick: I think there's actually something really important that we have to acknowledge about all of these data and all of these countries is that their population level data, which means that they are basically lining up really well with what the straight people in those countries are doing. Right? Because straight people make up the bulk of the population, right? So they're nationally representative studies. Yeah.

Dan Savage: Can we reproduce ourselves out of your bodies?

Debby Herbenick: That's right. So it's so immediate. None of these have been broken down by sexual orientation, right? So there are only broken down by age group and most of these data aren't even specific. So for example, some of the u s um, data, which comes from the General Social Survey, um, asks questions like, you know, how often in the past 12 months have you had sex? Right? It's like literally just had sex, which means so many different things to so many different people. When we do our research, we ask like very specific questions about like anal and vaginal and vibrators and, um, you know, everything, right? All kinds of different things. Um, but a lot of these studies have been pretty vague, um, to give you some other ideas about what the general social survey asked because I think it's still so messed up that they do that. But you know, they're, they're focused on trends over time and so they, I understand that they want to compare, but it means that even in recent years, there are still questions in there like, um, you know, what are your feelings about like same sex people having, you know, sex or people having sex with people at the same sex?

Debby Herbenick: Like always, yeah, it's wrong

Debby Herbenick: sometimes wrong. I'm wrong. Like, you know, like a little bit wrong. [inaudible] like literally the options I guess to frame. Yeah, there's option that's like none

Debby Herbenick: of my business or like amazing, you know, like there's sex with somebody of the same, right. And this the same stuff for like, you know, questions about like attitudes about sex outside of marriage, like always wrong. It's like, it's a weird survey. Questions really weird, right? Yeah. Have you seen an x rated movie in the past year, which I'm guessing to most twentysomethings means very little. And so it's like, yeah, so these questions, because they were asking us why in the 80s, like they keep asking it that way. So there's also just some other things that that make it, I think for me as a scientist, tricky to say with any confidence that that's as stable as we think it is.

Amanda Mull: I'm also curious if that breaks down at all by like socioeconomic status or ethnic group or region within the United States. Do we have any data on if this is like a problem among more affluent teens or less affluent teens or do we know?

Debby Herbenick: Yeah, so, and again, it's not just teams, right? That the, the Roci looks like we know young adults too. Um, so at least in the u s in the UK, it's not surprisingly, um, more, you know, there are some economic ties, right? So people who generally are higher socioeconomic status tend to be having more sex. Okay. Um, and especially for like young men without money, what, you know, less likely to have jobs are generally having less sex. Okay. Okay.

Dan Savage: Well, it seems to me that the, one of the obvious possible explanations is access to technology, pornography, um, that people are supplementing their desires, um, or satiating or you know, setting their desires with porn and tech in a way like this generation that were the sex has been dropping off of the last 20 years is the first generation to come up with access to the Internet 24 hours a day and it wired into their heads and the pleasures of that and the rewards of that maybe displacing the pleasures and rewards and effort required to actually get someone to go to bed with you when you can get on the Internet and get the world to go to bed.

Debby Herbenick: One of my favorite economics studies that relates to this,

Amanda Mull: it's very clever. It looked at the Brighton sort of when broadband Internet was introduced to different counties across the country and then tried to correlate that with teen pregnancy rates and it found that that alone accounted for like 13% of the decline in Prereq teen pregnancy. Wow. Which, and Vignette

Dan Savage: you talked about this like it's a problem when I'm old enough to remember when the constant sex panic was, kids are having sex, this is terrible and no kids are masturbating instead of having sex. This is terrible.

Amanda Mull: Right? It's statistically that's true. The, uh, as rates of adolescent and young adult sex have declined rates of adult rates of masturbation in the same groups

are reported. Masturbation People have gone up. And uh, I think like he said, that's tied to the availability of pornography to the normalization of masturbation in sexuality. And, uh, I was wondering if the masturbation in sex, do they trade off or are they both influenced by, you know, isolation in pornography and things like

Dan Savage: Gotcha. Well, it is a conservative technology takes the place of interpersonal relationships because it's a poor substitute for interpersonal relationships. But like the research use studied there, there are benefits to this, uh, you know, teen pregnancy going got also rates of sexual assaults have gone down. When I went to college in the 80s. The chat was porn is the theory. Rape is the practice. And as, uh, the Internet became available county by county, state by state as it came online and Internet pornography became accessible to everyone, rates in sexual violence where the Internet porn was available would fall, not rise. And so there may be some benefits, there may be some people sitting at home masturbating. We would rather be sitting at Oh, masturbating and going out and trying to find partners to endure sex with.

Debby Herbenick: That is true. Uh, at the end,

Amanda Mull: the opposite extreme of, uh, of pornography. Masturbation though I think you sometimes get people who are diverting what might be healthy energy away from partners and towards themselves literally. Um, and do you think, uh, in your research or in your research for the article, have you found that that is at all a problem

Kate Julian: that the

Amanda Mull: masturbation is substituting for sex? Yes. Um, so Debbie can probably speak to the research on this a little bit more. I know that some sex therapist that I spoke

Kate Julian: to think that it can be the case, that masturbation can sort of take the edge off your desire to the point where you might be bringing less desire to a partner. And that did come up in some of my conversations with younger people as well.

Debby Herbenick: Yeah, I mean some people certainly feel that way, but I always think it depends, right? Like if you don't feel like you want a partner, then like who cares? Like masturbate. Right? But yes, it's like what you really want is to go find somebody. I mean, it is true that sexual desire is a motivator for many people. So some people worry that like, well, if you're not having like that extra, um, sort of push from your own arousal or desire that would motivate you to maybe like get out and actually meet somebody or use your apps to meet somebody or whatever, then that maybe you're not getting what you want. If you're wanting to find like a human in the flesh partner. Right,

Dan Savage: right. There are certain things people used to have to do to attract a partner, most of which fall under the heading, get your shit together, get a job, get an

education, get an apartment, have a place. And if you don't need to get your shit together to satisfy yourself sexually, cause you don't need a partner anymore necessarily with tech and now, you know, masturbatory technology, vibrators and now insertable toys for men, maybe there'll be fewer people in this country with their shit together, then they're already are just terrified to contemplate.

Amanda Mull: Yeah, I mean, I also think a big part of this is shit together related and economics specifically. I mean, if you look at people under 35, the most common living arrangement now is with your parents. That's probably not

Kate Julian: super conducive to an awesome sexual, romantic life. And frankly, if you're in a situation where you're living with your parents, your first priority financially, maybe not dating, which can be really expensive, but maybe saving up money so that you're not living with your parents.

Debby Herbenick: Right. And that goes hand in hand with the rising rates of, uh, anxiety and depression among, uh, young adults and adolescents, what influence do you think that has on a, on their interpersonal activities? Yeah. We certainly know that from most people, anxiety and depression, keep them closer to her. Right. And keep them not wanting to go to meet people. There's a small percentage of people who when they have high anxiety or when they're depressed, they actually, I'm almost sort of self medicate by, by wanting to be sexual with other people, but that's a tiny percent. So more often it's going to keep them. Yeah.

Kate Julian: The medication is prescribed to people who are anxious or depressed are usually libido. If dot killers underminers kind of a lose lives. Yes. Sorry. It's kind of a lose lose and that, yeah.

Debby Herbenick: And it seems like sort of a vicious cycle, you know, the more anxious you are, the less sex you're having, the best sex you have, the more depressed you might feel. You know, your meds you need. Right? Yeah. Yeah. It seems self enforcing. But you, there's also so many amazing things happening with young people now to, right. So I teach college students that I you at Indiana University, um, I teach a human sexuality class, so my students are not, I don't ask them to write about their own sex lives and their papers that almost all of them do.

Debby Herbenick: And I have about a hundred students every time I teach. And I think one of the things that I've noticed that I find just fascinating, especially with the young men, is that more and more young men talk about delaying having sex for the first time or even if they've had sex once or twice, delaying it again until they find somebody who they really like. And what I find really interesting about it, I mean, it's almost all of the men who take my class now, oh, almost off. Um, but there's, they seem to be resisting some stereotypes about like young men and masculinity and that's good for them. Like they feel like that's the right choice for them, but they're not yet comfortable enough to admit this to any of their

friends. So like paper after paper after paper, it has these, these descriptions of the end.

Debby Herbenick: Like I'm so weird because I will have, I like feelings. I'm so weird cause I going to find some day like, and it got to the point, like in, in the fall semester when I was teaching this class, I started writing like the same thing to so many of them that I, that I opened up like a word doc and like wrote it out and copied it. And I would just like paste it and paste it into paper after paper because I just had so many men who thought weird for just wanting to connect with somebody else, but we're actively making choices to like declined sex that they like, that they had open to them. Um, but I thought it was really neat that, that they were kind of finding their own way. Um, and that maybe this is a middle ground to maybe at some point in the near future we're more men will feel, we know more straight guys in particular feel comfortable things. Which other, um, but yeah, it's just, it's fascinating and I don't know why that is. I'm attributing and a little bit to maybe the way that we've opened up just understandings about like gender and sexuality in recent years that maybe give some of these men more permission to do that. But to the extent that that might explain even like small bits of this decline, like I think that's a really neat way of, um, helping people just find the sex lives that they want. Right. Um,

Amanda Mull: yeah. And we should say this is not necessarily like an entirely negative decline. We're talking about the negative stuff right now, but people having the sex I want to have is great.

Debby Herbenick: And even the times we see like they're all small, right? So sometimes like we get these, these calls, um, you know, from journalist and what I really liked when Kate called is like, it wasn't like a panic, you know, like we heard from some writers who were just panicked that sex is declining. And I loved, you know, in your piece how you just sort of like took it through all the different possible things that might be going on because life is really rich and nuanced and people make lots of different choices for lots of different reasons, but we're certainly not in a sex panic. Right. Um, and

Amanda Mull: what you were saying about your young students struck me that, uh, I'm a millennial among my friends. I know that a lot of them have sort of pulled back from the, the lure of like hookup apps because they, you know, we've all experienced flip that as like, and found it sort of unsatisfying and hard to, you know, have good sex with a random person who doesn't know you and you don't trust. Uh, so what do you, what impact do you think that has on this phenomenon is sort of like we've, we've experienced and now we're reevaluating maybe the grinder, Tinder of it all. Yes.

Kate Julian: So you wrote about that a lot in your pants. No, I did. I did write about this a fair amount in the pace. One thing that was really surprising to me is when you try to kind of get data on this stuff, how ineffective and an infection will a lot of apps for our, for a lot of people. So for some people they work really well. Um, I

think particularly people who are looking for casual sex, people who are really conventionally attractive, they're awesome. And this is, if that's your thing, like your golden age. I think for a lot of other people though, they can be really inefficient and time consuming. I think the last time that Tinder released this data, which they have wisely for their own sake, stopped releasing the average user was spending like an hour and a half a day on the APP, which is a tremendous amount of time.

Kate Julian: And if you were spending that time doing other things, you might think of your Twitter like I was thinking of sort of old fashioned, um, you might be making more human connections. The other point I think is just like how inefficient that time is. So one guy I talked to who was really, he sort of described himself as a nerd on this, started like calculating his numbers and he's like, I'm swiping 300 times to the right for every woman I have a text exchange with let alone get a drink with let alone have sex with. Now clearly that's not everybody's success rate. But some other numbers I looked at suggests that that's actually probably a more typical than not. And I think also people are using it sort of as a digital distraction, a diversion. The problem is that because it's become the sort of accepted way to meet people, especially if you're in your twenties, I think it's having effects on sort of how acceptable it is to express sexual or romantic interests in other contexts.

Kate Julian: A lot of people told me like, I don't know if I can really ask somebody for their number. Like that's kind of not really the way to do it. It might be inappropriate, I might offend them. It might be awkward. Like fear of awkwardness was a big thing. One woman I really loved, um, talking with the sort of said this has been really great for me as somebody who socially anxious because it's really scripted and I know going in that if I'm interacting with somebody on this platform that they're looking for the same thing than I am and that takes some guesswork out. But she observed a very, with rate, great self awareness that as time went on it was making it harder and harder for her to do that same kind of thing outside of an APP.

Dan Savage: Yeah, there's a little bit of a contradiction there in the culture when we panic about people. I'm not saying you're panicking, but you know, we worry about people only, you know, wanting, you know, thinking they could approach someone or hit on someone on these apps. While at the same time we're trying to create a culture where you don't hit it people on where they hit on people at work. You don't hit on strangers on the bus or the subway, you don't walk up to women on the street and say smile. But we, so we need these places where by Denton entering them, you are giving everyone permission to approach you in this space. There are certain kinds of bars and clubs where it's understood you're in that kind of bar or club and you've chosen to be in that you made a choice to be in that kind of bar or club and people can approach you.

Dan Savage: They're not assholes for approaching you. They're assets. We're not going away. When you make it clear that you're not interested in their approach. And so,

you know, I think dating apps can be a net positive. It can be a real time suck and you have to have some self discipline around how often you use them, how much of your time you sink into them. But broadly and for the culture, I think they're making our workplaces resemble what we say we want them to look like, which is less, you know, a sexual marketplace, which it shouldn't be at all because we all carry a sexual marketplace around with us in our pockets. I can't tell you the number of people I know. Um, particularly gay guys cause I hang out a lot of gay guys who will see somebody attractive and then open their phone and see if they're on Grindr, not go up to them because going up to the mind like bother them. They might have a partner, they might not be interested right now, but if they're on Grindr too, even if they're in the same room we're park or whatever. In an environment where if you wanted to meet somebody used to have to go talk to them, you said you send out that indication, you can approach me in this space digitally and virtually.

Amanda Mull: Hmm. And that can be good. Um, I'm wondering, since we're a big trend, is delaying the age of first sexual contact, not just people having less sex. Uh, what kind of impact does that have once people start having sex? Like what the, you know, delaying for a couple of years dealing to college when you might've had sex in high school and previous generations or delaying until after college when it might've been in college, what, what happens then? How does that affect someone's sexuality over their life?

Debby Herbenick: Yeah, so overall it's about being on track or off track. I mean, we're talking about like as a whole, right? For every individual person is going to be different, but as a whole, generally if people are sort of like within the range of average age, then it's associated with like fewer problems later on sexually. So like really, really young, really, really older tends to be associated with more problems. But you know, I've never been convinced with that research that it means that those early ages or older ages are woods making. You have sexual problems later on. But generally like if you're waiting till you're 30 anyway to have sex, it might be because of like a lot of anxiety. Right? Or like other the, and same thing with like having like very, very early sexual debut. So I think it's complicated, but certainly like the slight increase in an age of sexual debut as we call it, is not at all concerning to me. I mean it's, it really hasn't gotten up that much. It's just, it's just a little bit, right. Yeah. Um,

Amanda Mull: but there is research that shows that the longer you wait to become sexually active, the likelier you had sexual dysfunctions. If you're, if you're like you're way up, way out there. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Uh, you,

Speaker 7: I wish they would get, you know, there's, there's a cutoff, right? It's like just everyone wants to get 17 in four months, stops the right mode, the data to be boiled down to when I go talk to the high schools, that's what they asked me.

Debby Herbenick: At what age should we be having sex with me? Not there is no age like that. Right. But, but when you're ready, if you feel safe. Yeah. Um,

Amanda Mull: so you've published some research recently, uh, about, uh, scary sexual experiences and experiences that might be traumatic. And uh, correct me if I'm wrong, but your, your research found those to be a relatively common, especially among young women. Um, how might, how do those come about with the ones that aren't like strictly illegal but just sort of like painful or uncomfortable or fear inducing in some way? Uh, how did those impact somebody's sexuality going forward? Is that, is that something that could be a cause of some of this change? Yeah,

Debby Herbenick: probably. So we, we recently published a study about people's experiences of feeling scared during sex. I was from a nationally representative survey of thousands of Americans ages 14 to 60, and we found a bet a quarter of the women and I think it was maybe around like 12% of the men reported, um, some type of experience that, where somebody had done something during sex that made them feel scared. And it's thought, it's actually the hardest paper I've ever had to write. I mean, when my graduate student and I were writing it, we would just sort of like, you know, not do anything on it for a while because it was just really hard to read people's stories about the exam we asked them to give and what was hard about it, what for me especially was, um, you know, there were certainly ones that, again, we're like paddling.

Debby Herbenick: Like obviously everybody would agree this is assault or rape. They described it as such, but there were a lot of other ones. For example, women would say things like, um, you know, sex was really painful and I asked my partner to stop and he said, hold on, you know, um, rather than actually stopping, there was a lot of like not stopping when it's painful. Um, there was a lot of, I'm choking and it's not, you know, some people choke consensually pleurably but this was clearly can choking that like nobody had talked about and it just got sprung on somebody's, there was one man who was what scared him was that his partner asked him to choke her and that just, you know, again, hadn't been talked about ahead of time and then free to Matt because he was afraid he was gonna hurt her. So I think what was really hard though is that there were also just, it was so gendered.

Debby Herbenick: Right? So even though we categorize everything in both men and women described things, for example, like in the contraception and condom category, but um, men's examples where things like, you know, partway through sex I realized I forgot to put a condom on and that was scary. Women's were more like, you know, it was in the 80s and I had an HIV positive partner and you know, I wanted to use a condom and he wouldn't let me. Right. So it was more about like coercion or like force or like, you know, he took off the condom midway and like made me have sex. So there's some really, you know, really hard gender things, you know, we want to do the next step in the study, which is like, how did this change things for you? Um, and I think it could probably go lots of different ways, right?

Debby Herbenick: I mean there are some people who probably have some scary experiences regardless of their gender or sexual identity and then they start making some different choices, right? That maybe help, uh, maybe they're a less adventurous, they tried to stay safer that has its own ups and downs. Um, there are some others who may not actually be that traumatized, right? Like they pick up, they learn, they move on and others who probably stay a lot closer to home. One of the things when Kate was writing this article that I mentioned that I thought, again, I think there's lots of reasons sex made declining, be declining. But I do hear from a lot of people, we see it in our research and I see it from my students were um, some kind of, yeah, some scary stuff is happening and I'm just not convinced that if enough scary stuff happens that you that easily go back for more, right.

Debby Herbenick: That like I think something in you is going to say, let me be a little bit more cautious or be thoughtful about my partner or take this next one more slowly. Um, because we are seeing, we see elevated rate. We see, for example, adolescent women, 13% of 14 to 17 year old sexually active girls have already been choked. Um, we didn't use to see that. Right. So, um, in our campus sexual assault cases, a lot of the sexual assaults now center around choking, um, you know, we've had the sexual assault, um, victimization officers who will say things like, we never saw choking before except in intimate partner violence cases. And now they just see it like lots first time hookup, sexual assault charges and that support. And you know, I think it's porn and I think it's like 50 shades of grey stuff, right? Like I think simultaneously we had different sexual, you know, a lot of different kinds of sexual explicit media. Um, that was really being embraced by all genders. Right? I mean, 50 shades of gray was a very female targeted all the men, you know, bread and watched it too. I know some of us that was a casualty as researchers that we had to read so we had to read that book. Um, but I actually, I

Dan Savage: want to lay the blame entirely important seat because we've abdicated our responsibility to provide kids with comprehensive sex education that is porn aware, important, conscious, right? Porn is a fact and it's ubiquity is a fact and the genie is out of the bottle and we can't pretend and people do see things in porn that then they either want to experience or they believe is expected of them in the sac sac, which is often a pressure on boys that I think is odd know that they watch porn and things. I don't want to do that, but that's what I have to do because that's what she expects from me. That actually if you've seen the new HBO show euphoria, they had a really good scene that involved choking to kids who liked each other. We're getting together and the boys started choking the girl and she was upset and then he was upset because he didn't do that to hurt her.

Dan Savage: He did that because he thought that's what women liked cause that's what he'd seen and no sex education gets between young people in porn and says and complicates that and says there are things that are we going to be portrayed that aren't expected, that porn isn't real sex, that it has to be consensual, that

there has to be negotiation. And what I thought was a smart about that scene in euphoria, did you guys see it was part of what she, they, they said, well they had this brief, intense conversation about it was she says, well if I asked for it, I wouldn't have freaked out. And he, he understands that, but he should have, you know, the fictional characters. But an ideal world, the boy in that circumstance would have heard that before he got to partnered sex about what he'd seen in porn.

Amanda Mull: Right. And it seems like we've mainstreamed a lot of, uh, sexual behaviors like choking, BDSM stuff, things like that, that, that we haven't at the same time mainstreamed, uh, any messaging about how to be a good partner or a communicative partner or a sensitive partner, uh,

Dan Savage: mainstream kink, but we haven't mainstream to the culture of cake. Right. Which is a culture of negotiation and consent obtained in advance. Right.

Debby Herbenick: And that's the thing, like when I first started teaching human sexuality or like people have always been into everything you can think of, right? Always. But like if you used to be into by kinky would like, like in my town, Bloomington, Indiana where we live, right? Like they're like munches there's like groups, there's a workshop, stuff like that. Like I could connect students with resources. I, with people they learned like safe, sane and consensual. They learn to talk, they learn these conversations. And then I just think it's like porn and 50 shades of gray and it's all just out there and nobody's talking to them in schools. There's not a lot in families, especially around these behaviors. Right. You might get like use a condom when you have sex, but most parents don't like wouldn't even know, oh, I should talk to my 14 year old about choking.

Debby Herbenick: Right, right. Um, and so like I get that generationally you did know that. But like it would be a great conversation to have. We have a paper that's coming out now that actually shows on some different levels, but more about like safer sex stuff that like when you have like parents who are talking with their, their kids about safer sex issues, condoms, STI is all that it interrupts the poor in effect. Right. So it's the, it's the young people, it's the adolescents who don't have those conversations with their parents who are and who watch the porn, who are more at risk for not having safer sex.

Kate Julian: Another aspect of this is people who haven't had those conversations, having really unrealistic senses of female sexual response. And what sex should feel like. So I talked to so many women who said that their early sexual experiences had been with men who thought from what they'd seen in porn that what they needed to do was pound away, possibly there might've been some non consensual anal penetration that they weren't ready for. And that the combination of those two things was really unpleasurable. One of the stories that I heard that really sort of, I found heartrending, um, was of a physician at a university health center who talked about how they were seeing more and more cases of women coming in with like volver fishers, something that you might

expect to see, like in a sexual assault case. But the women were not saying they'd been raped, they just were having sex that they didn't desire and they didn't actually know that it was supposed to feel different than that.

Dan Savage: Well, we don't send your pleasure in sex education, particularly for women. And so even young women, I hear from them all the time, we'll be sexually active. It will be consensual technically and yet it won't be pleasurable for them at all. And they don't even themselves expect that it should be pleasurable for them because female pleasure isn't acknowledged in sex ed. So as pleasure itself as acknowledged in sex and most sex ed is reproductive biology and some disease prevention, disease prevention, uh, you know how to make a baby, how not to make a baby. Any idiot can make a baby Bristol Pale and made too.

Dan Savage: But the weird people get tripped up with sexist. How do I talk someone into having sex with me? How do I make sure the sex we're having is mutually pleasurable? That's what we don't teach. Uh, I've always compared it to a driver's Ed class where they teach you how the internal combustion engine works and don't teach you anything about steering or breaks or stop signs, return signals. And so the first time you get in a car, you're going to run somebody over. And that's our sex. Sad. Here's how your reproductive internal combustion engine works. Good luck. And people run each other over and it's usually the boy running over the girl. [inaudible]

Debby Herbenick: we found in one study of a thousand women ages 18 plus. So the oldest in the study was about [inaudible] 92 I think, um, that on average women were sexually active with a partner for a decade before they first felt like a partner valued their pleasure, the decade.

Amanda Mull: I mean that's, I'd love to actually do that same study with men. We haven't yet, but a decade.

Dan Savage: Hmm. There is something that people can give straight people.

Speaker 8: Okay.

Dan Savage: Which is something we have a bite into, you know, plumbing and mechanics. Uh, and it's, I call it the four magic words. It's the question that's always asked when two guys are going to go to bed together for the first time, what are you into? Because it can't be assumed and straight people default to vaginal intercourse. Cause that's what straight sex is. And so when straight people get to consent, they stopped talking about what's next, about what they want to do. And when gay people get to consent, that is the beginning of the conversation. Not because we're magic, not because we're better, but because we have to keep having that conversation and straight people. And you know, people have opposite sex as often. Avoid that conversation and they need to have it. What are you into asking each other. Dot. Right, right. Um, no, not into being choked.

I'm not in the beginning. We penetrated without any proper consent I've gone into, but it took 10 years for you to get me off.

Speaker 8: [inaudible]

Amanda Mull: I have one more question, but we're gonna do, we're gonna flip the Q and a after this. That'd be thinking of years. People will come around with Mike's. Just Fyi. Please keep it short. But I wanted to ask what, uh, you know, changing gender norms or are clearly a play in a lot of these issues and, uh, how much does it impact these numbers potentially that women may feel, especially older, young adults who have had sexual experiences and maybe decided to have a few less or fewer, uh, that they might now feel empowered to say no to sex? I don't really want to have where in the past, you know,

Dan Savage: you just lie back and think of England.

Debby Herbenick: Yeah, we did. We do see, um, you know, we're seeing like slightly bigger portions of people saying that they want the sex more that they're having that is more pleasurable. Um, so again, I think, you know, this is not all bad to me. I think there's a lot of good and if people are being more selective about the sex that they have and focusing more in quality. I mean also some of these studies are looking at you like they're comparing the eighties to now, right? Like marital rape was legal in the 80s. So just because like that number was a little higher. Like that doesn't mean to me, I mean this is the other thing is like what means the earlier number was the right number. Right? I mean I think like it's not about numbers to me. Like are people ultimately having the sex that they want? And I think that's the question we used to always be asking ourselves

Dan Savage: not having the sex they tilt.

Amanda Mull: Yeah. Like that you feel like you can say no to some stuff where you can save later. You can say, not that I'm not into that. Right. Yeah. Maybe smarter, you know, your, or maybe just the other

Debby Herbenick: thing, you know that we do sometimes but not this thing that you're offering me tonight.

Debby Herbenick: Right, right. Yeah. Do we have my corners? Thank you.

Audience Member: Thank you all for doing this. And I do have a question for Debbie. I have a friend who teaches ethical leadership and he's walking on aids all the time with students in the environment of safe spaces, trigger warnings, that kind of stuff. How do you teach sex on college campuses without kids losing their minds?

Debby Herbenick: Well, you know, it is an elective for almost everybody who signs up and you know, it's very clear, at least the way I teach it in my syllabus. I mean these are all the topics and you know, if, if you're not ready, you know, for this to be in

this classroom and for these topics and be at least where I teach, we have those classes taught like eight sections of it. Every semester. I say, look, we've got great counseling resources, we've got this, we've got this, we've got this on campus. It will be offered again in the semester. But you know, what I've learned about content warnings and trigger warnings is that they're not always what people think that they are. Right. People always think that, um, that students might get very upset on the days that we talk about sexual assaults because they've had, you know, they have histories and assault.

Debby Herbenick: And that's true. Sometimes there's, you know, a student who says, I don't want to be in class that day and that's fine. But very often the things that are upsetting to students or the things that are upsetting to all of us, right? Like you have a, you're having a really rough time. Um, because of a breakup. I mean, I will say actually the, for the students who ask me to sit out of a class, it's the day we talk about love and relationships and it's, it, it's because somebody has either just gone through a breakup or is contemplating a breakup and they'll say, I'm so sorry. Can I just, I just don't think I can bear to sit through a class about love today. I mean, imagine that. Right? That's not what most people think of with like a content warning or trigger warning. Um, sometimes it's about STI is like that they have, you know, that they have herpes and they've had it for a long time and it's a difficult thing for them either for physical reasons like pain or social reasons.

Debby Herbenick: Um, and, and that's a tricky class for them. So I've just learned, I've been teaching him and sexuality for 16 years. It's not predictable. I'm just open to all students and their experiences in their lives and support them wherever they're at. Um, but, uh, no students lose their minds. I'm taking human sexuality and I think they get a lot out of it. And I wish we started comprehensive sex ed a lot earlier in life. And for parents who are parents or caregivers or guardians raising kids, it is never too late to start using accurate words and talking about all of this stuff. This is a question across the panel. Um, what do you think of the notion of we live in a, that because

Amanda Mull: of the Internet, I think that people are starved for touch and so when they have the opportunity to be sexually engaged, they go for the end game, right? Without any of the emotions or any of the things that they actually need and how that's possibly doing more damage and shorts continued to short circuit the touch that people really need and really start for. Does that make sense as a question

Kate Julian: does, I mean, I don't know that I've spoken to people who I would say are sort of jumping to the end game. But I do think that if you're not used to being touched physically, it can be an overwhelming sensation and probably a source of anxiety. I remember when I was interviewing Debbie for this piece at one point I asked her sort of what advice would you have for somebody who for whatever reason isn't as comfortable with their sexuality as they would like to be. And she had a really simple, I thought, compelling answer, which was like,

it's kind of basic stuff. It's the stuff that we need sort of outside of our sexual selves. Like take care of yourself, like sleep more, exercise more. If you're not comfortable getting touched, get massage, like get back in the swing of that. I don't know, and Dan's get your shit together.

Debby Herbenick: But yeah, I think that there are many things that we want in life. I think that, um, there's a notion that they, um, uh, called skin hunger, right? Which is that we all have some, some craving for touching and being touched and um, you know, some people do that really well. Like I've had some students who get some needs met while they're, while they're figuring out all the, like, interpersonal dating, hooking up love, sex, whatever stuff they get those needs met with like a pet or, right. Or like working in like a preschool and volunteering. I mean like there's really all these other ways that sometimes people just feel like I can get connection to other living beings. Um, while I figure this stuff out. Solid Gordon a now deceased sex educator was really big on the massage thing and just, you know, other kinds of touch.

Dan Savage: This for me jumps back to the defining sex as vaginal intercourse for the vast majority of people for whom opposite sex, sex is sex. That if you crave touch and you crave sex and you believe sex is vaginal intercourse, you will jump to that and skip everything else that may provide you with the warmth and comfort and intimacy and connection and the and satisfy that skin to skin hunger that can lead up to that or actually take its place. Like one of the things that I think is very beneficial for young people to hear and I'm often saying to them is you don't have to have penetrative sex, anal or vaginal to have an adult sexual experience that a lot of adults sex strictly a lot of the same sex adult sex is mutual masturbation and rolling around and maybe a little bit of oral sex and just really feeling each other and connecting. And if you don't regard penetrative sex as the be all end all and ultimate goal that you're going to rush to in every sexual encounter, I think you're less likely to get people, um, you know, running rough shot over each other to, to get to that. And then leaving people with a Volvo, Volvo visuals,

Debby Herbenick: older fissures, which I never heard today, tripped you up as long as it doesn't roll off my tongue somehow, my coworkers.

Audience Member: So, um, really, really wonderful discussion that we're having here tonight. Um, my name's Justin Smith. I am a recent graduate of Emory university in Atlanta, Georgia. And doing this type of work in the south comes with very specific challenges as you can all imagine. So I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how do you advocate for sort of comprehensive sex education that's affirming of, uh, kind of queer youth in conservative environments. Um, and what can that look like? So like, we know that we need to affirm kind of queer youth, Trans Youth, um, and provide education that helps them the healthy sexual lives as well. But how do you do that? Environments that are hostile to their very lives. How do we do that surreptitiously?

Dan Savage: I, I don't know how you do that. You can barely provide decent sex education about environment to straight kids, which, you know, in a, in an environment or a place that's dominated by people who wish to queer people didn't exist or believe that we don't exist. Providing comprehensive sex education that centers pleasure and pleasure is always centered in queer sex because we aren't having reproductive sex really often and then all ever, um, is nearly impossible. Um, because there's the fantasies that religious conservatives have about sex and then there's sex and sex is a fact in reality and sex predates, uh, all of our cultures. Sex is what a half a billion years old. Um, sex built us. It's building was ever coming after us and it doesn't care about our imaginary sky friends. And how do you say that to someone who thinks not just sex education, but everything should be bent, uh, in service of well to just to service their irrational beliefs.

Dan Savage: How do you say that in that community? I don't know. I say this where I live and I get away with it and I put it on the Internet so the kids in that community can read it. And I hear all the time from kids in the deep South who uh, and more conservative places. Spokane, Washington is practically the deep South who accessed the information that they need because it's more easily available online than it ever was. Parental controls on the ability of like your pastor, your youth pastor to control what you have access to is so limited now that rather than trying to shape the message to appease the craziest, most sex negative parent or, or church, just put the message out there and trust that kids who are so motivated, we'll find it. Yeah.

Amanda Mull: I'm from the deep south. I got the information cause I grew up with the Internet. Right? Yeah, it's all out there.

Audience Member: Thank you guys. Um, so my question, you've all spoken about how touch and intimacy and tenderness is so positive, but we're living right now in an era where on college campuses or in, um, in jobs, in job settings, et Cetera, there's so much sensitivity about not touching, about making sure that we're really, really clear about every word we use in every touch we do or don't or do, um, make in any kind of way. So on college campuses or in work settings, maybe more in college campuses are schools, how are we educating kids when you kind of do want them to have the intimacy of just nice touch, like gentle touch. But we're also, the whole media is saying you can touch anybody. How do you balance that? To be clear, I'm not saying it even has to be gentle, like some of them like rough and that's fine, right?

Debby Herbenick: Like rough, gentle, like whatever. But I want them to be able to figure out what they want, what they like, what feels good to them to explore that and to be able to get that. So, um, I don't actually see them having that much trouble. I think that there's some, there's sometimes a perception in the wake of me too that everybody's really freaking out and nervous, but I don't see that actually. Um, I do see with sexual assault, so our data actually showed that very few men are actually worried about being unfairly accused of sexual assault. Um, a lot

more women and um, and gay and bisexual men are worried about being assaulted. Um, then any proportion of men who are worried about being unfairly accused. Um, so, so yeah, I think that, you know, the, the thing is that the research are really clear that about 85 to 90% of young men and women want connection.

Debby Herbenick: One intimacy would prefer today would prefer to be sexual with somebody they like. Like across the board we found this other researchers find this, what I always tell my students that was at like, they need to start saying this to each other because they say it privately to me in papers they say it in surveys, they talk about like how much they just want to find somebody who like, they like to hang out with and like, and bisexual would that person too. But like they think that everybody around them, the only ones to hook up and doesn't actually want to be with somebody who they like at all. Um, but they need to talk about that with each other. So, you know, I'm lucky I teach a human sexuality class so we can have these conversations and I have all sorts of like little exercises we do that support them in that.

Debby Herbenick: I'm really glad I don't teach math where that would probably be like a weirder thing to do where I would probably be very scared about being like accused of harassment or something. But, um, I'm, you know, but I'm on a college campus. I teach human sexuality. Um, if you're in a, you know, high school in Georgia, no, like, that's going to be harder at the high schools in Indiana. There are more challenging and so, yes, I think like, we need the internet, sex education. We need people just going back to their schools. I often tell my students, like, if you want to make change, go back to your community where you came from, the high school you went to and meet with your principal, meet with a school superintendent. And I have some students that have done that. I've gone back and saying the sex education I had or lack of it failed me and this is what my friends and I needed.

Debby Herbenick: And can we change that? Um, even like for Lgbtq folks, like we've had like a lot of young people in our state who, one of the professors organized this thing and they go back like through their old high schools in Indiana as like a panel and talk about what they needed when they were in high school at their old high schools. Um, like to the students who are there now and that's an Indiana. So I'm hopeful that, you know, things like that can happen, but they do take people organizing it and doing it and it takes an awful lot of work and some right people to open doors for you. Um, question here. Um, how do we find the balance about speaking about it without making it such a big deal? Like now that I'm in my forties, I miss my twenties what it was just just easy to have sex. Now it feels like it's complicated and you have to have all sorts of conversations and ev it's politicized and stuff. Is there a way to have a conversation about it without making it such a big deal that everyone's terrified of it and we're like stepping on eggshells. I'd really love simple sex to come back.

Dan Savage: What did your twenties you usually had a group of like intimate surround you that you felt comfortable just being open with. And those relationships often fall away as life gets more complicated and stressful as you have a of relationship, a marriage. If you become a parent, that kind of intimacy with friends that you can just be really low with about like what you're doing and what you'd like them goes away. And so you have to consciously curate those relationships for yourself. You have to make an effort to keep that kind of connection, not even with people you're partnering with sexually, but people you can be open with about your sex life, sexual interest, sexual activities. Those are the, those are the people that fall away. And often in, in twenties when your first experiment and you're first learning about yourself sexually, that's when you're most likely to endlessly talk about yourself sexually because it's helping you frame and understand yourself because you cause explaining yourself to someone often means explaining yourself to yourself. I'm coming to a better understanding of yourself. And then you do that last, the older you get it. And I'm all so I know. Um, and I've had to, you know, I have, I make an effort to have people in my life that I can still be that open with and initiate those kinds of conversations when they're welcome on both ends as opposed to just blurting that out. Like you often get in responsiveness.

Audience Member: Um, so for, so you guys talked a lot about the different ways that you can kind of do better as parents, but there's so much research on how to raise a drug free kid, how to raise an alcohol free kid, which is good luck. But how, what, what's the kind of statistics and methods that you found to raise the most sexually healthy? Okay, well [inaudible] you're not looking,

Kate Julian: so I'm not sure that there really is a street right

Debby Herbenick: forward answer to this. I don't know. That'd be, I mean, do you, so yeah, it's not like, I mean it's not like step by step like how to build a desk. Right. But right. But I mean, but the general idea is like, you know, to have a conversation and not the talk. Right. So ongoing. Yeah. So like since going it unwelcome, your kid is not going to want to have that conversation.

Kate Julian: This is interesting to me as a parent of younger kids, I have a five year old and a nine year old that in conversations with other parents about like how should children be taught, how babies are made. It turned out like first of all there's very little, at least in my exploration, like good literature about this. The books for kids are not very good in my opinion. No offense if anyone's written one. Um, and what's really weird is there's this idea that's really pervasive among parents that I've encountered that you should wait until they ask and then you should answer only what they ask. So if they ask, where do babies come from, you say they're made of a sperm and an egg and if you're four years old and that makes no sense, like tough, you know, basically they have to get to the point where the, the, the current sort of parenting thing is where they can ask a question that they don't have the information to ask.

Kate Julian: Right. And so how has the baby, I mean, how is a four year old or five year old or a nine year old gonna know what tasks and there's no other topic as a parent that I would approach that way. Right? I wouldn't say like, well actually like I'm going to wait for you to ask about tolerance or all these other sort of important values and then I'm going to teach you those things when you unlock the, the sort of the lock with just exactly the right pass cat passcode. So I think one answer is you sort of are dangerous. Said. What'd you say? You said unwelcome and ongoing, right? Yeah, a 21

Dan Savage: year old son. Um, and he is a straight and had the gayest parents that religious art, the religious rights, opposition to gay people adopting. So we'd make our kids gay. If my husband Terry and I couldn't make a kid gang, nobody can

Speaker 8: [inaudible]

Dan Savage: you know, it was my experience talking to him that we did, he'd want to talk to us about yet anything. And I knew that I had to talk to them about it. And I would say to him like we would go on like I don't drive, so we would go on a walk. So we didn't have to look each other in the eyes. It's one of the pieces of advice they often give parents within, you're gonna have a sex talk to the kids, just go for a drive. So they don't have to like make eye contact and be embarrassed. So we would go on a hike and we would, and I would do a doubt. I didn't, we wasn't a conversation, it was a download. Here are all the things that I think you need to know and he'd go, shut up. I don't want to talk about it. I know it already dad. And I would say I, you might know it already, but I know for sure that you would say you knew it already to avoid this conversation. So the sooner you, let me say all this, the sooner we're done and I would do the download now my sample sizes one like baby, you have different

Kate Julian: kids, so you really do have to force it. I think, and I, I talked to multiple people who told me weirdly the exact same anecdote when I asked them about their conversations with their parents where they said like not only did I not have conversations with my parents when I had to bring home a permission slip from school saying we're doing sex ed, I faked my parents' signature because I couldn't even bear to have them know that I was receiving sex ed because I thought that they might use that as an occasion to talk to me.

Speaker 8: [inaudible]

Dan Savage: like literally it's like violation. It's like violating the, even like the concept loosely in the margins around the edges about consent. I had nonconsensual conversations with my kids

Speaker 8: that he did not want to have

Dan Savage: did. He withdrew his consent to have these conversations that I still talk to him about everything I thought he needed to know which included consent, which

considered included pleasure, which included masturbation and because I me included things that like most parents wouldn't think to talk about their kids traumatic masturbatory syndrome. Like, I know that there are some boys out there who put their penises between mattresses and box springs to masturbate and then can't ejaculate during partnered sex because the inside of a person doesn't feel like a crusty mattress laying out across the box springs. And so I told him that he was like shot,

Speaker 8: but if he had wound up doing that and I could have prevented that, how guilty would I feel? There's also, I'm really not, but don't tweet anything I'm saying about my kid cause it was murder. There was also a really

Debby Herbenick: terrific curriculum called our whole lives that was developed by sex therapists and sex educators decades ago and is offered through unitarian churches. You don't have to be a member of a unitarian church. I know some people that like never go to any services or any kind, but with like drop their kid off every Sunday for like the unitarian sex ed basically. And um, and it's a really great curric curriculum. There's actually, the high school portion of it is used in the most effective college sex was college sexual assault prevention program known so far on. So that's like a very important, it's the closest we get in America to what the Dutch do in their grade schools. Yeah. Yeah. It's so, I mean, that's just another possibility that our whole lives, the owl program.

Amanda Mull: Yes. If we are out of time, I'm sorry. Thank you for being such a great crowd. Thank you for actually asking.