

## How to Talk About Sex with your clients

### Transcript:

Clinton Power: Hello. This is Clinton Power here from Australia Counseling and it's my great pleasure to be speaking today with Tanya Koens, who is a Sydney sexologist. Hello, Tanya. How are you today?

Tanya Koens: Hi, Clinton. I'm really well, thank you.

Clinton Power: Now, today, we're talking about sex therapy. I think this is such a fascinating area. I love talking about this topic and you are very much a specialist in this area. Tell us a little bit about your practice and how you came to be interested in sex therapy.

Tanya Koens: Ah, this is a question I get asked a lot, actually, how did I find myself in the work that I do. I was studying counseling and I was thinking about what I'm going to do with my business when I finish the course, and I have a background in marketing. I was wondering what kind of niche I could pop myself into and also what kind of clients would work with my personality.

Part of the things that I thought I could bring to counseling was that I am very open-minded and very non-judgmental. People in my course were trying to pop me into drug and alcohol counseling, thinking that would be the way to go for me, but having already had one corporate burnout, I thought, hmm, that might be the way to another one and I was thinking very broadly about how I could approach an interesting way of counseling for me, so I did a student placement.

I did a student placement at Impotent Australia, which is a men's sexual health helpline, and I found the calls there absolutely fascinating. The second call I took, I think, was from a lovely young Muslim man who was getting married. He told me all about his culture and the laws there about marriage and divorce and how things were for females and he really wanted to learn how to keep his wife happy in the bedroom. He wanted tips and pointers, he was taking his marriage and his responsibilities very seriously and I was really appreciative to have a look into somebody's personal life on that level and to be able to give them a hand.

I think from that moment on, I was absolutely fascinated and hooked with people's relationships, people's sexuality, and it turns out that throughout all the course and the time I was there, nothing made me blush. Nothing made me embarrassed. I found the whole lot fascinating.

Clinton Power: Well, that's really critical, isn't it, because if you're going to be a sex therapist, I'd imagine you're going to be talking about sex a lot with a lot of different people, a lot of different kind of sexual orientations and sexualities and presentations, so it sounds like you are ready for this work.

Tanya Koens: Totally. I remember sitting there in the tea room one day and the course coordinators from Sydney University walked in. I hadn't said a word and they took one look at me and said, "You, my dear, are a sex therapist." I was, like, oh, okay. With that, it wasn't very long before I was enrolled at Sydney University and studying sexology there.

Clinton Power: Fantastic. Let's now touch on maybe what are some of the most common myths about sex therapy because I think myths really abound in this area, so maybe you can start to challenge some of those for us.

Tanya Koens: It's interesting because I work in the area and I speak so frequently about sex, I don't get to hear about myths about what I do. Often, that sort of stuff is spoken about sex therapist when they're not in the room. What I do find is there are a lot of people out there that think that sex therapists have sex with their clients, or they watch them while they're having sex and point out how they could do things differently.

Clinton Power: Yeah, that's a really common one, isn't it? Where does that come from? Maybe that's just from movies and ...

Tanya Koens: Well, that's actually like a surrogate. A surrogate will do that. A surrogate is somebody who actually have sex with their clients or does the coaching whilst present, but they also have qualifications in sexology. I think what's really important is to know that there is a whole spectrum of people and services out there in the sex therapy realm. I sit at the end of the talking spectrum. To call yourself a sexologist in Europe and America and, increasingly so, in Australia, you must have qualifications in counseling, and you must have

qualifications in sexology or sexual health. That's very important. It's also very expensive.

There are other people out there who offer services that are more hands on. There are people who work in the tantric realm. There are sexological body workers and there's, of course run in Australia or the Institute of Somatic Sexology, which is a very good course, and I think I'll be doing that one next year just to broaden my outlook and my coaching. There are people right up the spectrum until you get full-on sex workers who are actually doing good work and helping their clients.

I sit at the talking hands-off end. People who are members of the Society of Australian Sexologists, which is my industry body, are not allowed to touch. We follow the same rules as CAPA and PACFA, so talking therapy based on talking modalities.

**Clinton Power:** Thank you for clarifying that. I wasn't aware that even there was a role of sexual surrogates so that makes sense. Now, why do you think therapists struggle to talk about sex with their clients? Because personally, I'm really quite amazed at even the number of couple therapists out there that don't even ask their clients what's going on in their sex lives.

**Tanya Koens:** I'm amazed at that, too. In fact, I get a lot of couples therapists. They meet me at counselors gatherings, or they see me speak out, and they're like, "Oh, my God, I want to refer my clients to you." I look at them and say, "Wow. Don't you talk about sex with you clients?" and they're, like, "No, I feel really uncomfortable talking in that area." I think maybe therapists are afraid to discuss issues around sex because they carry their own guilt and shame, fear or lack of understanding.

That, really, I find sad, but I think that's one of the issues that I deal with every single day, with every single client, all these issues where people are made to feel bad or they feel bad within themselves about their sex life, their sexuality, their orientation, their proclivities. That's such a shame.

**Clinton Power:** This does come back again to the very important issue of therapists doing their own work, doesn't it, and addressing if you do have issues with your own sexuality or expression of your sexuality, you need to address that before you can actually help clients.

- Tanya Koens:** I think that's sort of a segue into why I developed my workshops, is because I thought I could help people become more comfortable with that. One of the lines that I take is that I'm sad that sex is really still taboo in many parts of our community. I think, in the end, we're all sexual beings, every single one of us. We all have desires, urges, fantasies and the need for connection. If we can take away the guilt, the shame, the stigma and the judgment about all of these things, I think the world would be a much happier and a much sexier place.
- Clinton Power:** It's quite surprising, in a way, because I grew up in an era of ... I remember being a teenager watching the Ray Martin Show and good old Rosie King, who I believe is still working these days, would get on there and talk very candidly about sexual issues and people were kind of amazed that that could happen on daytime television. But all these years later, I'm not sure in some ways we've made much progress.
- Even in popular media, there is so much sexualization of people, of models. It's on TV all the time, yet it still seems to be a very difficult thing for people to talk about openly and honestly, particularly when it comes to issues of performance. Have you found that as well?
- Tanya Koens:** I have, and I find it really interesting that people don't want to talk about sex to their partners because they're A, afraid of being embarrassed, and B, afraid of upsetting their partner. I'll often talk to people who've been unhappy with their sex life for 10 or 20 years and they just hoped that their partner will sort it out, or work it out. I'm a little bit confounded that if it hasn't gone well initially, how on earth is your partner going to work out what you like or what you don't like if you don't use your words?
- Clinton Power:** Absolutely. Why should therapists talk about sex with their clients?
- Tanya Koens:** I think that asking clients how their intimate life is going should be a routine check in therapy. Sexual identity and our desires are a very important part of our identity and it can cause considerable stress if we're out of alignment with our sex lives. It can pop out at other parts of our lives and our identity out. I say to clients over and over again that our sense of self could be intrinsically bound up with our genitals, so if something is going wrong in the sex life department, it will often creep over into people's relationships, into their daily life, and very much into their sense of self.

I wonder how people can go to relationship counseling and not talk about their intimate life. I don't understand it. I think that problems in the bedroom will impact the relationship, and problems in the relationship will impact the bedroom.

Clinton Power: I would have to say in all my years of practice, it's very rare to work with a couple that is experiencing significant relationship stress and their sex life is working. There seems to be this correlation that conflict and drifting apart or ongoing unresolved issues generally is correlated with not having sex. Have you found that as well?

Tanya Koens: I have, I have. In the talks that I give about sex and sexuality, I say that the purpose of sex in a long-term relationship is to foster intimacy. It creates the stretch between couples. Oxytocin that's released during sex is linked or it's actually called the heart hormone and it's linked to feelings of generosity so people who are having regular physical contact and intimacy can be much kinder and generous towards each other. That's a really helpful thing in a long-term relationship, because when you look at the nuts and bolts of it, we're all fundamentally very irritating.

Clinton Power: When should the sex conversation be initiated in therapy? Are we doing this in the first session?

Tanya Koens: Yeah, I think so. If you're going to bring up sex, when you're taking their relationship history, when you're talking the client's family of origin, you can ask the question, "How is your intimate life?" You can ask, "How did you meet your partner? How was your intimate life when you met your partner versus today? How much sex were you having? Are you happy with it?" Give them an invitation to talk about it. If they come in with relationship problems, ask about the sex as well, because as we were just saying, they're intrinsically bound up with each other.

I think if people come in anxious or depressed, again, you can ask, "How is that anxiety or depression impacting on your sex life?" Because a lot of that stuff really will impact their people libido, impact their self-confidence and that has a knock-on effect in the bedroom.

Clinton Power: I'm guessing it's really critical for the therapist to, in a way, model being really comfortable having these conversations right from the

beginning because that is effectively going to help the couple or the individuals feel more comfortable talking about sex.

**Tanya Koens:** Well, one of the things I learnt in my studies, they did some research in the UK that said 95% of patients would like their doctors to be able to bring up sex with them, but only 9% of them would bring it up themselves. That spoke tons to me so I think it's part of our responsibility to bring up and let people know this is a place where you can talk about sex.

When people come into my rooms, they see this is a place where you can talk about sex. There are two bookshelves full of books with interesting titles. I have one out on display that's called Sex and Bacon, which gets a lot of comments from people because they want to know what that's about and it starts a conversation. I have some sex props around some sex toys, it's because I sell some of those as well. I have bottles of lubricant and people know this is a place where it's okay to talk about that sort of thing.

**Clinton Power:** Fantastic. From the moment they step into your room, they know that these conversations are going to be part of their therapeutic relationships.

**Tanya Koens:** They do, and they're expecting it. They may be a little bit nervous. I think a lot of people come in with that fear that I'm going to touch them, or I'm going to make them do something that they don't want to do, which is definitely not the way I work.

**Clinton Power:** How do you allay that fear in your clients?

**Tanya Koens:** I think I am fortunate in that most people find me really very easy to talk to, so after five minutes, they're relaxed, they're having a laugh. I use humor quite a lot. I use a lot of normalizing. It's really interesting to see people physically slump on my sofa when they're hearing information about what their issue is and understanding that it's normal and it affects lots of different people, not just them.

**Clinton Power:** That's really critical, isn't it? I'm also thinking of even couples I have worked with when they have been so highly uncomfortable about speaking about sex, the tension you could cut a knife with the tension in the room. What tips do you have for therapists when your clients are really ... it's not an easy place for them to go?

**Tanya Koens:** I think you can notice it in the room, so I speak to them and say, "Wow, I can see that it's really difficult for you, guys, to talk about this," and then asking each of them, "What makes this difficult for you to discuss with your partner?" Because often that's where you'll get to the point where, "Well, I'm embarrassed," or "I'm afraid of embarrassing them," or "I'm afraid of upsetting them." Then I can reflect that back to their partner and say, "Are you embarrassed talking about sex?" or "What would it be like if we had an honest conversation about what you want and what your partner wants?" Often they're really relieved that they can get to it in a safe place.

**Clinton Power:** Fantastic. Now, let's talk about some of the most common sexual issues you're seeing in your practice. I know in my practice over the years, disparate levels of libido seems to be coming up again and again, but what are you seeing? Because you're primarily working with sexual issues, so what do you see?

**Tanya Koens:** That is one of the most common presentations, the mismatched libidos. In fact, I sought out one of my supervisors because that's her area of specialty and she wrote her PhD dissertation on this. I do a lot of work around the model she has in her dissertation and every day I'm amazed how effective they are and how they work. A lot of it is around helping people identify and find their sexual personalities, not making people right or wrong, just making people okay, it's who they are, finding out what if you're one of these and you're one of these, how do we get you to overlap because that's where the magic happens so I'll definitely spend a lot of time in that area.

If I'm getting people come in with mismatched libido there's often a lot in the relationship so I do a relationship pulse check and see how they're communicating with each and we do a little bit of work communicating openly and honestly first. I call that the foreplay for sex therapy because if we can't even have a conversation that's constructive with each other, how are we going to talk about the most difficult parts, so do a lot of the relationship stuff.

Then more common issues for me are erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, anorgasmia and painful sex. I get a lot of things ... I'm becoming quite well known in the BDSM and polyamorous communities because of my open, non-judgmental philosophy. People who've had negative experiences with other counselors will often

come and see me because they know they won't be judged for their sexual preferences or relationship choices.

Clinton Power: What is anorgasm? It's not a term I'm familiar with.

Tanya Koens: Anorgasmia is inability to have an orgasm.

Clinton Power: Ah, okay, great. Yes, I have had a client like that before. That's a fascinating area. Obviously, we're touching on a whole range of issues here and you have an upcoming workshop which is, of course, going to go much, much deeper into everything we're just touching on. We're barely scrapping the surface. Maybe just tell us a little bit about what therapists can expect in your upcoming workshop, which is on, I believe, September 8, 2015 in Sydney.

Tanya Koens: That's right. September 8th, that's a Tuesday and it's in Surry Hills. I developed the workshop because I was picking up a lot of clients that have told me they had seen a therapist that couldn't talk about sex and that just really made me sad. Also when I meet therapists out they're like, "Oh, I've really got some clients that I want to refer to you," and it made me curious as to why they didn't feel comfortable talking about sex. I asked around and many of my colleagues in the therapy world have expressed a fear or an anxiousness about having a lack of knowledge.

I thought it would be a good idea to give people tips on how to bring up sex, what to look for, what type of issues might present in the therapy room in relationship problems or in individual things and give them an idea of what hidden things to look out for. Because I think, especially around sex, clients never tell you the whole story so some strategies for drawing out information and types of language for getting people to tell the whole story. I'm a practical kind of girl. I reckon that people don't want to sit on my sofa for two years talking about their mother. They want to get out and they want to get going and start having the sex life they've always wanted so the workshop gives people practical tips and techniques that they can try with their clients.

The people who have attended the previous workshops that I've done have been really delighted at what they've learnt about sex, about sex therapy and felt really confident at the end of it that they could go out

and have conversations with people because they had a whole bunch of practical tools and techniques to draw on.

**Clinton Power:** I think this is really important. I feel very strongly that knowledge is power and I actually just thinking of the other day, we had an Australia Counseling member who had certain presentation of a sexual orientation issue with a client. I directed her to one of my previous interviews with Dr. Joe Kort who, I believe, is also a sexologist in the States. She was just saying how helpful that was to actually just learn a framework or get some more knowledge or understanding.

I think this is what's going to be really beneficial for therapists attending your workshop in Sydney because often it is a lack of knowledge or even just not knowing what to say or do when something pops up in a session. When you do have that information, it can really build your confidence and I think, ultimately, the clients are going to benefit so much.

It's sounding like a workshop for anyone who works with individuals or couples who are presenting sexual issues. I think if you have a fairly busy practice, it's hard to believe you're not being confronted by sexual issues because it's a part of everyone's lives at one point or another. What can people do to register if they want to take action, or even maybe just find out a bit more or contact you, Tanya?

**Tanya Koens:** They can give me a call at 0438-110-502, or they can have a look at Surry Hills Therapy website, which is [www.surryhillstherapy.com](http://www.surryhillstherapy.com). The front page will have a link to the workshop so you can have a look at the content, what's going to be covered, what the learning outcomes are and the registration form there.

We have the early bird special going until the 28th of August, but if people want to register after that, it's only pretty much a week. If they say that they've seen this interview and they're registering after the early bird, we'll keep the early bird going for them.

**Clinton Power:** Great. Fantastic. I'll just mention if you do happen to want to register after the 28th of August, just mention you listened to this interview on Australia Counseling and Tanya can take care of you there.

Well, look, I've enjoyed this conversation so much, Tanya. This is literally something I could talk about with you all day. It's such a

fascinating area and I totally get why you love working in this area. It's great the work you're doing and you're helping so many people. I'm wishing you all the best for your workshop and I hope we can speak again sometime.

Tanya Koens: Fantastic. Clinton, I'd love that. You're right. We could talk about it all day. It's something I'm very passionate about.

Clinton Power: Okay. Well, bye for now.