

The Sexual Attachment Conference **Understanding** Your Sexual Story

May 5th & 6th, 2023

Hosted by: Jay Stringer and Adam Young



Friday, May 5th

Welcome: Jay Stringer & Adam Young

Body Check-In

The primary feeling I have coming into this conference is ______.

"May you find in yourself a courageous hospitality towards what is difficult, painful and unknown." -John O'Donohue

Origin Stories What origin stories do you carry regarding sex?

Let's Be Friends

Additional notes:



A. What is the Definition of Sex?

- 3 Words that Summarize what Sex Should Be:
 - 1. _____
 - 2. _____
 - 3. _____

B. Why Do Our Stories Not Meet the Ideal?

- Sex is "natural"—but that doesn't mean it's naturally easy or pleasurable.
- What if you didn't have a great "sexual debut"?
- The Reality of Male-Centric Sex: Bridge the Orgasm Gap!

When women don't frequently reach orgasm, _____% of men say they do enough

foreplay. So do _____% of women.

Key Thought: Many couples assume she's "broken" because we assume the male experience of sex is the "right" one.

C. How Have We Warped Sex?

- Threat, obligation, and fear ruin sex-and yet in the evangelical church, much teaching around sex has revolved around these three things.
- Our research has found that what we believe about sex affects our experience of sexour orgasm rates; our libido; our rates of pain-even whether or not we are generous lovers. Ideas matter.



Key Thought: Male-centric sex sets up female obligation.

1. Sex with Obligation: Duty Sex isn't Sexy

"A wife is obligated to meet her husband's sexual needs and give her husband sex when he wants it."

Obligation lowers women's orgasm rates and libido. Obligation plays a large role in the increased rate of sexual dysfunction disorders (like vaginismus) in women.

Women's bodies experience obligation as ______.

"A husband is entitled to sexual release, and it's cruel if a woman withholds sex."

Entitlement changes men's experience of sex, lowering his satisfaction with his wife, and making him a more selfish lover.

Key thought: Obligation and intimacy cannot co-exist, because obligation prioritizes one person's experience and desires over another, effectively erasing one person.

Obligation is ______, rather than ______.

2. Sex Under Threat

"A wife should have frequent sex with her husband to keep him from watching porn."

In this vein, wives are seen as "methadone" to avoid husbands' unwanted sexual behaviors and compulsions.

But porn and sex are not substitutes for one another; they are polar opposites. By making them substitutes, we devalue sex, and we devalue God's image in each other.

What other outcomes have you believed that sex can help you avoid?

When people have sex to avoid a negative outcome, then this is coercive, and can rise to the level of marital rape.

If you can't freely say _____, then you can't freely say _____, either.



"Boys will push your sexual boundaries, so you need to be the gatekeeper."

You may also have heard this as: Boys are the accelerators; girls are the brakes. What other messages were you taught?

How can this affect women's ability to get aroused later?

What assumptions underlie this teaching that can be harmful for our experience of sex?

3. Sex with Harmful Stereotypes

"All men struggle with lust; it's every man's battle."

What do messages about how boys "can't help" but objectify do to men's experience of sexuality? What do they do to women's?

"All men want sex all the time."

What are the problems with associating high libido with masculinity?

What are the problems with gender essentialism (that men are one way and women are always the opposite) when we talk about libido?



Key thought: These shaming messages build distance, distrust, and defeatism-and they are not even accurate!

C. A New Way Forward: Sex that is mutual, intimate, and part of a flourishing life.

We usually define most sex problems as ones of FREQUENCY: One person wants sex more than the other, or one person doesn't want sex enough.

Frequency and libido, though, are the symptoms, not the actual problem.

When these five things are present, frequency tends to take care of itself:

1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
okin	ng at that list, which TWO have	e been the biggest problems for y

Lo ou?

- 1. _
- 2. _____

What would "Sex without Masks" look like for you?

What is ONE action step you can take to address each of your two biggest roadblocks?

SATURDAY, MAY 6th



Jay Stringer - Understanding Your Relationship to Desire

Our relationship to desire does not begin as a blank slate.

We will explore three ways our relationship to desires is shaped:

- Your Nervous System
- Your Family System
- Your Adverse Childhood Experiences

Nervous Systems

Sympathetic Nervous System

Parasympathetic Nervous System

The Clutch

Family System

The strongest systems in the world are those that are *differentiated* and *linked*. (e.g. an airplane, the human body, etc.).

If you want your relationship to grow, promote deeper individuation and connection.

Differentiation and linkage soothe two of the greatest fears in relationship:

- I will be _____
 OR
- I will be _____

Rigid Families



The key difference between a rigid home and a home with good boundaries is their

understanding of discipline. The root word of discipline is to ______.

Therefore, the question to ask yourself is: Was discipline used as a means of intimidation to force conformity OR was it used for instruction?

Three key features of a rigid home:

- You orbit your life around their expectations. They want _____ to change so _____ don't have to.
- Your gifts are _____.

• Your individuation or development is framed as ______.

Three ways childhood rigidity affects our current sexual and relational life:

- Rigid families create fertile soil for ______ to emerge. 77% of people struggling with out-of-control sexual behavior report coming from rigid families.
 - Boys who were overpowered by their parent(s) tended to grow up into men

who had fantasies of finding ______ over others.

- Girls who were overpowered by their parent(s) tended to become women who sought out behavior and fantasies where their sense of ______ was recreated.
- A parent's intrusion amplifies ______ and _____. These patterns often continue long into adulthood with a significant other.
- You find yourself in similar relational patterns from childhood.
 - Some require their significant other or children to orbit around them.
 - Some seek out significant others, bosses or authority figures who remind them of their authoritative parent.



Key point: While natural to feel frustrated by an unhealthy behavior or difficult relational dynamic, we need to see them as clues as to how we made life work within our family of origin.

Disengaged Families

Dan Siegel says that children need 4 S's

- Seen
- Soothed
- Safe
- Secure

In disengaged families, you are much more likely to experience 4 U's instead:

- Unseen
- Upset
- Unsafe
- Unconfident

Three ways childhood disengagement might be impacting your sexual and relational life:

- Disengaged families create fertile soil for ______ to emerge. 87% of people struggling with out-of-control sexual behavior report coming from disengaged families.
- You rely heavily on sex for _____ and _____.
- Because you never learned intimacy, you continue to struggle to develop it with friends and partners.



Key point: Some of us have loathed our unwanted desires but have never honored them as a deep desire to find belonging (reversing heartache)

Others excuse their behavior as "self-medicating" or driven by "loneliness", but never address how their choices set them up to be disengaged from all over again (repeating family heartache).

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Trauma

"We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body."

"For every soldier who serves in a war zone abroad, there are ten children who are endangered in their homes. This is particularly tragic since it is very difficult for growing children to recover when the source of terror and pain is not enemy combatants but their own caretakers."

-Bessel van der Kolk

"Trauma is not what happened to us. Trauma is what happens inside of us in the absence of an empathetic witness." - Gabor Maté based on a similar, original quote from Peter Levine

Gregory Orr Example

What are three formative traumas you went through before the age of 18?

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

What was the negative core belief you developed in response to each experience?

- (I am undesirable, I'm unable to defend myself, I can't trust myself)
 - 1. _____
 - 2. _____
 - 3. _____

How might your current sexual or relational problems repeat the negative core beliefs established through your trauma?



Sexual Abuse

While there are many types of trauma that can impact us, there are few that introduce as much heartache and confusion as sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse, like all forms of trauma, exists on a spectrum. On one end might be violent and degrading abuse, but it could also be something we've dismissed as an "awkward" or "weird" interaction. Additionally, the introduction of porn can also be a form of abuse.

The Four Core Experiences of Sexual Abuse

- 1. The abuser emotionally ______ with the survivor. *Oxytocin*
- 2. The survivor knew ______ with their abuser. *Dopamine*
- 3. The survivor felt the pressure to maintain ______. *Cortisol, adrenaline, noradrenaline*
- 4. The survivor eventually felt ______and eventual numbress. *Serotonin depletion*

Trauma cocktail

The trauma cocktail is when our formative sexual experiences contained oxytocin, dopamine, cortisol and the depletion of serotonin (among many others). Sexual abuse is a diabolical experience where bonding, pleasure, stress, shame and overwhelm occur in the same event.

Survivors of sexual abuse might find their struggle with sex occurs in one of two ways:

Reenactment: We continue to pursue sexual experiences which repeat the trauma cocktail of feeling aroused, bonded, stressed, overwhelmed, and eventually steeped in shame.

Reversal: We shut down future sexual desire to decrease the potential for betrayal or excitement.



- 1) In what ways was your family characterized by rigidity? Write down 1-2 memories where you encountered the rigidity of your parent(s).
- 2) In what ways was your family characterized by disengagement? Write down 1-2 memories where you encountered the disengagement of your parent(s).
- 3) What evidence of trauma and/or sexual abuse do you see in your story?

4) Given what you learned at the conference, do you have new insights about traumatic or sexual experiences you previously dismissed as inconsequential?

5) *Hypothesis Time*

I wonder if there is a relationship between my _____ (type of family system)

and _____ (current sexual difficulty).

6) Hypothesis Time

I wonder if there is a relationship between my _____(adverse childhood

experience) and my _____ (current sexual difficulty).

7) What is one childhood experience you feel ready to explore with a therapist or friend for the first time or in a deeper way?

Healing from sexual abuse requires three dimensions:

- 1. Blessing your desire for pleasure and connection.
- 2. Grief and anger for how your abuser stole from you.
- 3. Owning and taking authority of your sexual story.

Additional notes:

Adam Young - Attachment and the Big Six



Attachment is the degree to which I feel relationally connected to you, and originally, to my primary caregiver.

Attachment is the degree to which I have a felt sense in my body that I am cared for, and that I am going to be responded to when I have needs or desires.

The Still Face Experiment

Why is the baby calm and happy? It is because the baby knows that Mom is *responding* to it. It is not merely Mom's expressiveness that the baby needs; it is Mom's responsiveness.

Secure attachment is an embodied sense of knowing that I matter to my primary caregiver, that they **want** to be in relationship with me, and that they will respond to my needs.

Securely attached adults anticipate that when there is relational rupture—when there's interpersonal conflict—the relationship will be restored. It's only a matter of time, and it will come about without either me or the other person having to sacrifice our individuality.

If you received The Big Six as a kid, you will be securely attached as an adult.

The Big Six



1 Attunement

Attunement refers to reading the emotional state of the child. Reading the emotional state of the child.

2 Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to "What did your parents do with the sad face they saw at the dinner table?"

If you never would have told your Mom if something bad happened, it is likely because you learned from a very young age that it wouldn't matter if you told Mom.

3 Engagement

Engagement means that your Mom and Dad wanted to know you, the real you—with all of your quirks—and that they sought to know you and draw you out.

Engagement means that your parents had a genuine desire to know your inner emotional world and that they pursued you.

4 Able To Regulate Your Affect

Affect is the felt sense of what is happening in your body. Affect refers to your inner emotional and bodily experience.

The way a child's brain develops the neurobiological structures to self-regulate is by having their affect interactively regulated by parents who are attuned, responsive, and engaged.



5 Strong Enough To Handle Your Big Emotions

As a child, you needed to be free to express negative emotions—to cry, rage, or fall silent —knowing that you would be responded to in a loving, meaningful way.

6 Willing To Repair

A secure attachment is not built on the absence of failure but on the willingness of the parent to own and rectify failures when they do occur.

What mattered to you as a child was not that your parents got it right each time, but that they recognized when they missed you or hurt you and responded in a way that brought comfort and reconnection.

Avoidant Attachment

When your caregiver is often unavailable, dismissive, or rejecting, you will develop an avoidant attachment—i.e., you will become avoidant of attachment.

An avoidantly attached child reasons that it is easier to try to regulate his own anxiety than to seek comfort from his unavailable or unresponsive caregiver.

The child adapts to his environment by avoiding the longing for closeness and emotional connection with his parents.

"We can grow up in homes in which the food finds the table, the money finds the college funds, and the family even finds the church each Sunday; but somehow our hearts remain undiscovered by the two people we most need to know us—our parents." - Curt Thompson



The Marks of Avoidant Attachment in Adulthood

- 1. You will feel more comfortable with emotional distance and separateness.
- 2. You will enjoy relationships at times, but never really need others.
- 3. You will tend toward an auto-regulatory state.
- 4. You feel needed but not wanted.
- 5. You will expect other people to handle their own big feelings. "I'll take care of me; you take care of you."
- 6. You likely have decreased access to—and awareness of—your emotions.
- 7. You are apt to recall facts about your life but have great difficulty recalling memories of family experiences where there was authentic emotional engagement.
- 8. You will tend to idealize their parents (to avoid connecting with how bad it really was) and insist that past family life has little to no effect on how you developed.

How Avoidantly Attached Adults Experience Sexuality

- 1. It may be hard for you to emotionally connect with your partner during sex.
- 2. Given the above, you may have an affair... because when you're having an affair there is much less emotional intimacy.

3. You may turn to sexual fantasy.



4. You will likely have trouble wanting your partner, desiring your partner.

Ambivalent Attachment

A child will develop an ambivalent attachment when she experiences her primary caregiver as inconsistent and, at times, intrusive.

"I'm not certain whether my parent will be able to meet my needs, at least in any reliable way."

Intrusiveness refers to the fact that ambivalently attached children are often required to meet Mom's (or Dad's) emotional needs.

The Marks of Ambivalent Attachment in Adulthood

- 1. You have great difficulty regulating your big emotions.
- 2. You are often plagued by a deep fear that you are going to be rejected or abandoned, which makes it very difficult to trust anyone.
- 3. You tend to believe that unless you dramatically express your pain, it is unlikely that the other person will respond.
- 4. You almost always feel like you are too "needy."



How Ambivalently Attached Adults Experience Sexuality

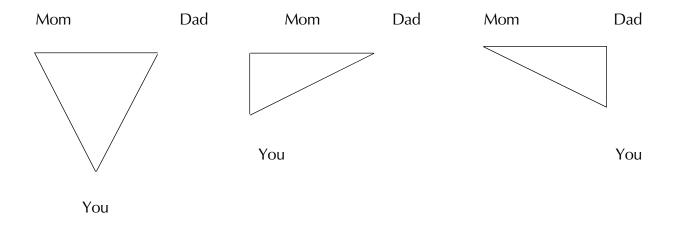
- 1. Your sex life is largely about reassuring yourself that you are truly loved by your partner.
- 2. You might use fantasy as a substitute for intimacy. The fantasy is about someone who WANTS you and will be there for you.
- 3. Since you don't feel secure in your relationship with your spouse, it may be hard for you to be clear about what you want sexually.
- 4. You may agree to do things sexually that you aren't comfortable with because you don't want to lose your partner's affection and love.

How Securely Attached Adults Experience Sexuality

- 1. You are able to be emotionally present when having sex.
- 2. You feel comfortable enough about who you are and comfortable enough in the relationship that you can risk sharing the specifics of what you want to do sexually.
- 3. You are filled with desire, and you are comfortable with your sexual desires. Your "wanter" is fully operational.

If you want to be a better parent, the single most important thing you can do has nothing to do with interacting differently with your children. The single most important thing you can do is to: address... your own... story!

Adam Young: Triangulation and Subtle Sexual Abuse



Triangulation means that one parent becomes closer to you, the child, than to their spouse.

You cannot understand your own sexual story without putting language to how emotionally close your parents were *to each other*.

Triangulation is synonymous with subtle sexual abuse.

Two Deadly Dynamics of Subtle Sexual Abuse

Dynamic # 1 — your goodness is consumed (usually by your opposite sex parent).

Dynamic # 2 — as a result, you are setup to be envied by your same sex parent.



Subtle sexual abuse occurs when a child becomes the object of a parent's affection, when the child becomes the person that the parent starts to emotionally lean on or turn to.

There is nothing loving or caring about a close parent-child relationship when it services the needs and feelings of the parent rather than the child.

"My father always had me by his side when I was growing up. I was his little sweetie. He and my mother didn't have much of a relationship so I was the object he adored. When I was younger, I enjoyed all the attention and closeness."

"It felt so good to be able to make my mom stop crying and put a smile on her face. I was more than willing to be there for her. I felt so important and powerful. After a while it seemed that my mother actually preferred my company over my father's."

The person who has been subtly sexually abused will not feel abused at all... quite the opposite, they will feel idealized and privileged.

"I thought I had the perfect parents. I was particularly fond of my mother because she was always there for me, to comfort me and talk. We talked about everything. Often she talked about my dad... I always felt special around her because she trusted me with personal information. My father was an attorney who loved his work. He seemed more married to it than to my mother. But he made sure we had everything — the best clothes, schools and whatever we wanted. It was hard to be angry with him. Besides, as a family, we seemed fine. I always felt special after one of my talks with Mom... I thought including me was my mom's way of making me feel special... I had no idea my mother was seducing me because she was lonely."

When you are required to function like a surrogate spouse to your Mom or Dad, your childhood is stolen... because you can't be a kid when you're being an adult.



Symptoms of Subtle Sexual Abuse

Symptom # 1 On the one hand you will feel privileged because of the special relationship you have with your father; on the other hand you will feel like you are never doing enough for him.

Symptom # 2 You will feel guilty about your own needs and probably have a difficult time identifying what they are.

Symptom 3. As you think back on your childhood, there will be a sense of rivalry and competition with your same sex parent.

Symptom # 4. You may have feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.

Recovering From Triangulation/Subtle Sexual Abuse

- 1. You have to name the reality that you were used. Used in the sense that your mother consumed your goodness and presence.
- 2. You have to name that your compass has been whacked your whole life.
- 3. You have to begin to let go of, and grieve, your idealized image of the parent who triangulated you.
- 4. Begin the process of emotionally separating from the parent who triangulated you.
- 5. You have to take yourself off the pedestal that you have been put on.
- 6. You have to understand how your history of subtle sexual abuse may be playing out in your current sexual relationship.

Desire



What is your relationship to your *desire*?

If you have a history of sexual harm, desire can feel dangerous.

Your brain pairs your desire for care, for connection, for being seen and noticed—with "something bad is going to happen to me."

If you are insecurely attached—whether it's avoidant or ambivalent—you likely have very mixed emotions about your desire... because you have a truckload of unmet desires in the basement of your heart.

"I don't want to want."

<u>Choice</u>

Sexual choices are far more complex, nuanced, and complicated than most people want to acknowledge, especially most Christians.

Choice is not the same for all people.

Priming refers to the likelihood that particular neural networks will fire in the present based on past experience. Priming is why choice is not the same for all people.



Jay Stringer: Why Can't I Change? Understanding Sexual Difficulties

Big Ideas:

Sexual problems, while maddening, are a normal part of life. The complexity is that we want our problems resolved, but rarely seek to understand their meaning.

One hour of curiosity for your sexual difficulties will take you further than a thousand nights of prayerful despair.

Unwanted sexual behaviors and sexual difficulties are a roadmap to healing, not a life sentence to shame or strife.

Two popular, but incomplete paradigms to deal with sexual problems are:

- 1. Lust management
- 2. Shame management

We need a third way: **Symptoms are holy prophets which communicate uncomfortable truths. In other words, all symptoms are forms of communication**.

A metaphor for us to consider today: Your sexual life is a ______.

Go out on to the front porch and ask questions to your unwanted behaviors or your lack of sexual desire.

What are some initial questions you have for your sexual life?



Four Strategies of Unwanted Sexual Behaviors

1. Reversal

- Longings (Mirror of Erised)
- Circumstances (Powerlessness)

2. Repetition

- Trauma
- Childhood style of relating
- Judgment / Shame

3. Relief

- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Hope

4. Revenge

- Anger at partner
- Anger at self

A Brief Statement on High and Low Desire



Every romantic relationship will eventually have desire discrepancies. The partner who wants more sex is the **high desire partner (HDP)**. The partner who wants less sex is the **low desire partner (LDP)**.

The ______ desire partner determines the frequency of sex.

John Gottman's research shows that couples can successfully navigate sexual desire discrepancies if these two things are true:

- 1 They stay ______.
- 2 They make sex a _____. (Remember the definition of sex Sheila Gregoire offered!)

Five Influencers of Low Sexual Desire

- 1. A Form of Protest
- 2. A Signal of Past Sexual Harm
- 3. A Symptom of Betrayal
- 4. A Sign of Sexual Shame



5. A General Medical Condition

Key Point: Rather than condemning yourself (i.e., thinking you are broken), get curious about what the low desire is trying to communicate.

Detective Time

For Those with Out-of-Control Desire

I wonder if I pursue _____(unwanted behavior or fantasy)

because I am seeking ______ (reversal, repetition, relief, or revenge).

If so, fight less to stop an unwanted behavior and fight more to heal the pain or increase your tolerance for distress. Integrity with your pain and emotions will help you outgrow your unwanted behaviors.

For Those with Low Desire

Of the five influencers of low desire listed, the two that resonated the most with me were:

1.

2.

For Everyone

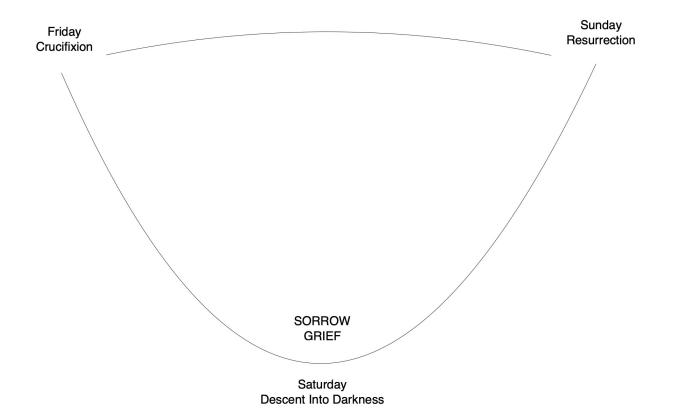
How might my sexual difficulties be inviting me to personal growth? Relational growth?

How might my sexual difficulties be inviting me to be more forthcoming about my needs, experiences, or desires?

Recall one sexual experience where you felt deeply connected to yourself. Next, recall a sexual experience where you felt deeply connected to the one you love. What made these experiences deeply connecting?



Lingering in Death



Healing requires:



- Naming the harm you experienced in your family of origin
- Feeling your *emotions* about the harm you experienced
- Grieving the harm you experienced.

Grief is the body's natural response to seeing the truth... of the heartbreak... of your story.

What's keeping you from being captured by your own story?

The Surprise of Healing

- 1. It is not a return to the old status quo.
- 2. It is always a surprise.
- 3. It is a gift.
- 4. It is unique to you.



Heather Stringer: Low Desire in Committed Relationships

Key Features of Low Sexual Desire

The Protest of "No" and the Power of Evasion

Finding Eros

Next Steps and Resources



Sex is the stage on which you can rewrite the scripts of your life. These resources can help you do that.

Adam Young - https://adamyoungcounseling.com/

Jay Stringer - https://jay-stringer.com/

Sheila Wray Gregoire - https://baremarriage.com/ & https://sheilawraygregoire.com/

The Allender Center (Seattle) - theallendercenter.org

Story Workshop. Four-day group experience where you engage your story in more depth (next one: August 17-20, 2023)

Narrative Focused Trauma Care Certificate Program. (4) four-day weekends (16 days total). Group experience where you engage your story in great depth.

Recovery Week. Six-day Intensive group experience focused on healing from sexual abuse. If you have a history of sexual abuse, we highly recommend attending one of Dan Allender's Recovery Weeks. Jay and Adam are both part of these weeks for men.

Unwanted Guide Training (Online) - https://jay-stringer.com/professional-training/

A thirteen-week online training for leaders (therapists, clergy, coaches, and lay leaders) designed to help them better understand their sexual story so they can be more effective in guiding others to do the same. Email <u>madeline@heartofmanjourney.com</u> for more information.

Get the training you should have received in seminary or graduate school.

The Journey Course (Online) - thejourneycourse.com

A 5-month online program to help people identify and transform their struggles with unwanted sexual behaviors like the use of porn or extra-marital affairs. You will have one-month free as part of your conference registration.

The Sexual Behavior Self-Assessment (Online) - <u>https://sexualbehaviorassessment.com/</u>

A self-assessment designed to help people understand why they are pursuing unwanted behaviors like porn or extra-marital affairs. After completing the assessment, you will receive a 40+ page report on the key drivers of your behavior and compass headings for how to transform it. Learn why you do what you don't want to do.