

Book Review

Good Loving Great Sex

Dr Rosie King

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Everyone thinks about sex. As clinicians in sexual health, confronting our own values and experiences is especially important if we are really going to be helpful to people seeking advice or referral. This book is intended for anyone human, medical or not.

The question of what is 'great sex', or simply what is 'sex' is as individual and as complex as ever.

Casanova's belief was that brevity ensured sexual success. Renowned for his skills and satisfaction in pleasuring his lovers, his encounters generally were for a few months only. The dilemmas of the longer term form the principal focus for this book.

Did Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky have 'real sex'? If we are to believe the popular press, penetrative penile–vaginal intercourse (in the heterosexual setting) is the only real thing, even to young people. The pervasiveness of this assumption provides a further challenge for the author.

This is not a 'how to' book, in the sense that specific sexual techniques are not the primary focus. The title page, 'finding balance when your sex drives differ', holds the more accurate thesis. Practical interpersonal communication skills are offered as a basis for developing a more extensive and variable sexual repertoire. There are also very clear sections on desire, its biology, physiology, normal variations, gender specific patterns and their controversies, and the challenging of myths about sex.

The author is medically trained and has worked for more than 20 years as a sex and relationship counsellor. In her introductory notes, she emphasizes that the book is inclusive of short as well as long-term relationships, same and opposite sex partners, married couples and those who are not. She reminds us that same sex partners could be assumed to have more synchronicity, but in fact often face desire discrepancies like anyone else. Not being in a current relationship does not lessen the relevance of this book. Where previous relationships have been troubled, there is much scope in the text for reflection and future experimentation. Regarding solo pleasures, the sections on masturbation, its dilemmas culturally and individually, and its great value in one's own and partnered exploration from a young to a very old age is well and enthusiastically detailed.

The reviewed edition at first seems text heavy with its small typeface. This may be off-putting to many readers,

however, its format is extremely user friendly and consistent throughout. Case histories are frequent and integral (all heterosexual), and nonthreatening. There are clear chapter headings, numerous subheadings, bullet points for emphasis, little boxes for quotes (humorous to literary, Mae West to Woody Allen, Samuel Beckett to Dorothy Parker, Eric Fromm to Jerry Seinfeld), and particularly useful are the larger boxes entitled 'Be your own sex therapist'. These contain questions based on the text at hand, designed for self-reflection and to invite partner participation. Each chapter then ends with summary points. Illustrations are very occasional, and are nongenital.

It is therefore possible for those who do not wish to read the book in sequence, or who are finding the text repetitive, which is sometimes the case, to skip sections as desired. The index is particularly useful to clarify points further as needed.

The juice, as it were, comes in the last third of the book. A metaphor for relationships in fact. This final part of the book is introduced by a brief mention of vaginismus and hence a need to expand the repertoire of satisfying sexual experiences. It explores the 'CISS' (communication, intimacy, sensuality and sexuality) continuum, suggesting that one can be available for CISS at various levels, that there can be lovemaking (though not penetration) without arousal, that orgasm does not have to be the aim or inevitable, debunking the myth of 'don't start anything you can't finish' ('a pithy piece of folk wisdom'), and permission for 'off ramping', i.e. each partner is entitled to stop at any stage, ('if you can't say No you can't truly say Yes'). Guilt, obligation and coercion are mentioned here. It is coupled with a strong statement for sexual self-responsibility. Sexual abuse is dealt with briefly here and at various points. Further acknowledgement of its importance and specialist needs is given by way of the resources offered at the end of the book.

From here flows a guide to stretching safely beyond one's sexual comfort zone, permission for lower or higher levels of involvement in sexual activity depending on the mood and needs at the time, and ways of saying No 'softly', acknowledging the vulnerability of the higher need partner when rejected outright.

The foregoing is especially useful for women in the setting of chronic vulval pain. The rekindling of physical and emotional intimacy with a sense of entitlement to one's own

pleasure is liberating. Confidence in one's own and partner's sexual self-responsibility is crucial. The same can be said for performance anxiety issues in men, where erectile dysfunction or too rapid ejaculation might occur.

There is only brief mention of safer sex and contraception, with more detail on sexuality in circumstances such as pregnancy, post partum, menopause and ageing. Medical conditions such as chronic pain, medication side effects and alcohol and other substances are described. However, for sexual health practitioners, there is too little on issues in negotiating condom usage. Playfulness with condoms can increase their usage and reduce many anxieties.

Coping with a sexually transmitted infection (STI), both in terms of self-image and contact tracing would also be a valuable addition. Maintaining a relationship in such circumstances or starting a new one (especially with a diagnosis of genital herpes or warts) and the accompanying personal challenges need specific inclusion. Serial monogamy and later age of longer commitment are a fact of modern life.

There is also no mention of dilemmas surrounding same and dual sex attraction. This is a perfect example of the need for communication to ensure safer sex practices, especially where there are frequent casual partners in the context of an ongoing relationship. It is certainly appropriate for a book aimed at the general public.

Working through the book, people are likely to find various challenges. Where they cannot advance in the communication or sexual practices suggested, the need for individual or relationship counselling is likely. This is alluded to at several points.

No book can serve everyone, hence the detailed resources list for more specialized situations. The controversies are also useful and enlightening, stirring one's assumptions. Originally written in 1997, this edition being 1998, it seems quite up to date in its communication focus. There may have been more emphasis on STI had there been awareness of this decade's worldwide patterns of increasing chlamydia, gonorrhoea and more recently syphilis.

If one gets through the whole text it may auger well for commitment to one's own and partner's(') sexuality and relationships. Equally, if one wishes to 'dip' there is freedom to do so, benefit to be gained with the ease of returning for more. This book is now a regular companion in my day-to-day clinical practice.

Dr Karen Berzins MBBS DipVen DRANZCOG
Sessional Medical Officer, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre
Carlton, Vic. 3053, Australia.