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Teaching Pearls: Sex, Sexuality, and Gender in Older Adulthood

Sexuality is Multidimensional

Sexuality encompasses biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, eroticism, intimacy, relationships, and reproduction. It is shaped by psychological, social, cultural, political, and spiritual/religious factors.

Sexuality is Fluid

Sexual desires, behaviors, and identities can change across the lifespan. Terms like "sexual fluidity" and "erotic plasticity" describe this flexibility. Trainees should not assume stability or make clinical judgments based on norms.

Sexual Health is Lifelong

Sexual expression remains important for quality of life and wellbeing into older age. Trainees should assess sexual function as an ADL and not presume seniors are asexual.

Relationships Evolve

Long-term partnerships often transition from passionate to companionate love. Different intimacy habits sustain relationships over time.

Diverse Sexualities Exist

LGBTQ identities, non-monogamy, kink/BDSM increasingly emerge later in life. Trainees should avoid assumptions and listen to how clients self-identify.

Body Changes Occur

Normal aging alters sexual response and functioning. However, overall health correlates more than age. Adaptation to changes is key.

Grief and Loss Are Common

Older adults may grieve lost relationships, unmet sexual milestones, youthful appearance, and abilities. Processing these feelings is needed to embrace present life stage.

Cultures Differ

Trainees should explore their own biases and respect how clients' cultural or religious backgrounds shape perspectives on sexuality and aging.

Sex Positivity Matters

Sexual rights extend across the lifespan. Trainees should convey openness and refrain from imposing values or dismissing concerns due to ageist norms.