

ANY QUESTIONS PODCAST
EPISODE 4: PLEASURE GAP

(INTRO MUSIC)

Maggie: Welcome to today's episode of Any Questions. I'm Maggie.

Nick: And I'm Nick.

Maggie: Today we're going to have a conversation about the pleasure gap. What is it? What's the cause? What are some societal and individual impacts? What are some ways that we can close the gap?

For the purpose of today's episode, we are talking specifically about men and women's sexual relationships but we want to acknowledge that the pleasure gap exists outside of the gender binary and in queer relationships. But, for the most part, the research exists on heterocouples.

Nick: We'll share some stories, some laughs, maybe some awkward moments and hopefully we'll all learn a little something.

Maggie: You ready to start?

Nick: I am so ready.

Maggie: Have you ever seen the movie "When Harry Met Sally"?

Nick: I actually haven't. But, there's that one scene.

Maggie: The scene where Sally explains how women fake orgasms all the time?

Nick: Yeah, that one. And then Harry is like, just completely baffled by all of it. Let's listen to the clip for reference.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

Harry: Hey I don't feel great about this but I don't hear anyone complaining.

Sally: Of course not you're out of the door too fast.

Harry: I think they have an OK time.

Sally: How do you know?

Harry: What do you mean how do I know? I know.

Sally: Because they . . .

Harry: Yes, because they . . .

Sally: How do you know that they really . . .

Harry: What are you saying, that they fake orgasm?

Sally: It's possible.

Harry: Get outta here!

Sally: Why? Most women at one time or another have faked it.

Harry: Well they haven't faked it with me.

Sally: How do you know?

Harry: Because I know.

Sally: Oh, right, that's right, I forgot, you're a man.

Harry: What is that supposed to mean?

Sally: Nothing. It's just that all men are sure it never happened to them and that most women at one time or another have done it so you do the math.

Harry: You don't think that I could tell the difference?

Sally: No.

Harry: Get outta here.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

Nick: So it's a funny scene. Women fake it. What does it have to do with the pleasure gap?

Maggie: Well, this scene in particular is less so about the pleasure gap but more about our society.

Nick: I see. So it's a commentary on how it's the guy's fault and they don't know anything?

Maggie: No, not quite. When you look at this movie or clips from "Seinfeld" or "Friends", all examples of media from Nick and my formative years . . .

Nick: Yeah, I had all 10 seasons of "Friends" on DVD.

Maggie: We see that the only conversations happening about women's pleasure and orgasms is when it's presented as a gag, a joke, or in a competitive nature. The achievement of the female orgasm is almost seen as a demonstration of masculinity. Like, an accomplishment that can be checked off in a box that determines manhood.

And, why is it always that a woman's orgasm is shown as this laborious task that is so overly complicated? Like, in "Friends", Chandler can barely wrap his head around the fact that there are more than three erogenous zones. I think that the clip from "When Harry Met Sally" is a prime example of how society has warped our views about sex.

Nick: Gotcha. It's not one person's fault. Our society has, in most cases, socialized men to think they're entitled to pleasure. But it's also made women feel they are obligated to give pleasure and then fake their own.

Maggie: That's one piece to the puzzle, yeah.

Nick: This is like a 1000 piece puzzle.

Maggie: Real quick. What do you know about the pleasure gap, Nick?

Nick: Well, up until we started researching for this podcast, I knew about nothing. Right now, I still know about nothing.

Maggie: It's definitely a complex topic. Essentially, research has shown that there's a disparity between how frequently heterosexual men and heterosexual women have pleasure during sex and how much they climax. And, we know that orgasms are not the only measure of pleasure. But, that is predominately where the research has been done.

Nick: And straight men are enjoying sex a lot more.

Maggie: Right. In fact, straight men are experiencing orgasms 35 percent more frequently than their partners. Additionally, gay men orgasm 85 percent of the time; bisexual men orgasm 88 percent of the time; lesbian women orgasm 86 percent of the time and bisexual women orgasm 66 percent of the time. Leaving heterosexual women with the lowest rate of orgasm, at 65 percent of the time.

Nick: So basically straight men orgasm more frequently and straight women orgasm less frequently than any other group.

Maggie: Which is why this clip is important.

In the lack of comprehensive and meaningful sex ed, we learn from movies. Like, "When Harry Met Sally", or porn. Or our friends. Or tabloids. All of which send the message that sex is about performance rather than pleasure. Or they leave out pleasure entirely. Or focus on the pleasure of one person, by in large, men, and that after the man ejaculates, that's over. This message reinforces the idea that sex is always centered around his pleasure and ends when he is done.

When all the sources we are learning from are actively avoid pleasure and communication narratives, whether it's in the classroom or on the TV, it makes sense that the pleasure gap exists. We'll talk more about our lacking sex ed curriculums in just a few minutes.

Nick: We clearly all have different sources of information and experiences surrounding sex. We also have different values, beliefs, comfort levels and identities that shape our understanding of these topics.

Maggie: Totally.

What were some of your experiences learning about pleasure and communication?

Nick: I mean, that's a really tough question. I don't really know.

I've been pretty lucky in that I have a family that is open about talking about sex. I mean, it's awkward to talk about it with them but it's not taboo. So I think that initial openness to have those talks with my family as a kid allowed for future communications with my partners now that I'm older.

And, now that I'm thinking about it, that probably did help with the pleasure aspect. I'm OK with being able to ask a partner about their level of comfort or pleasure. But, that's just me. You and I are incredibly different.

So, what are your thoughts?

Maggie: For me, I did not connect the dots between pleasure and communication until I learned about consent, which was my first year of college. Once I learned consent as a mandatory aspect of sex, and as a basic level of respect, I started to understand that sex was supposed to be pleasurable for every party involved.

It took hearing language around safety and pleasure for me to realize that all the romantic comedies and TV shows I watched as a teenager were promoting a norm or a narrative that was super limiting. All of these societal and cultural factors taught me that sex only existed for heterosexual couples and that it was penetrative and not fun for girls and I didn't want any part of it.

Nick: I feel like it was difficult to connect those dots between pleasure and communication before hitting college. Like, when I think back to my high school sex ed classes, I really don't think I learned that much beside being afraid of getting a girl pregnant and STIs.

Maggie: Yeah. That's super real and definitely is a common theme for many people.

This is nothing new but acknowledging that our education system is failing us, especially those most marginalized, such as folks with disabilities or those in the LGBTQ+ community. Curriculums that fail to include consent, communication and pleasure are creating a culture of fear and shame that repeats a cycle of harm over and over again.

Nick: So, it's actually kind of wild but during our research we found that according to the Guttmacher Institute, only 13 states in the U.S. required sex ed to be medically accurate. And only eight states require information about consent. And there's nothing about communication with a partner.

Maggie: And we know that including information that is medically accurate and that acknowledges consent and communication works.

Nick: You know who's doing a great job with sex education for kids?

Maggie: Who?

Nick: The freaking Netherlands.

(HORN BLARING)

Maggie: Yeah. They have comprehensive sex ed that doesn't pathologize young people's interest as sex being inherently deviant and dangerous. Rather, they acknowledge that sexuality is actually a healthy, functional part of almost everybody's lives. And, because of that, they have lower unplanned pregnancy rates, accessible health care, less stigma and more positive sexual outcomes, aka, pleasure.

Nick: So, we're seeing schools with comprehensive sex education versus, you know, just teaching abstinence, are seeing less STI rates and less unplanned pregnancies in their populations. Communication brings pleasure and safety in so many ways.

Maggie: Totally. In preparing for this podcast, both Nick and I started asking our friends about some of their experiences with sex and pleasure.

Nick: Super fun conversations.

Maggie: Set the scene, Nick. What were the conversations with your friends like?

Nick: So, basically, a couple weeks ago I sat down with my friends for dinner and I started asking all these sex-related questions. It was difficult to try to figure out how to phrase these questions delicately so I basically just asked them straight up, "Hey, do you care about your partner's pleasure?"

And they were like, "Well, duh."

Maggie: They said, duh?

Nick: Not quite, duh, I'm summarizing here. But, they said to me that, you know, if you're with someone you care about, what's the point of them being there if their partner isn't having any fun? What's their purpose? They wanted to be able to prove to their partners that they're worth something in that sense.

Maggie: That's an interesting perspective.

Nick: Yeah. And I actually really respected it. They were like, "If I'm not doing anything for them, I might as well go home and whack it."

(LAUGHTER)

Maggie: Wait, that said that?

Nick: Yeah. Makes me proud.

I asked them some questions about their sources for information about sex. A common theme that I found were their families were all relatively open with them. One of them asked their family during dinner, the age-old question, where do babies come from? And then their sister immediately jumped

in and explained everything without any hesitation. So it seems to be that families play a major role in normalizing sex.

What are some of the conversations you had with your friends?

Maggie: For me, I feel like I've been having a lot of these conversations ever since I began working with the Health Center on sexual health a year ago.

I found that a common theme among college students is a complete lack of conversations about pleasure in any sexual health setting. For a lot of my friends this meant having a lot of bad sex for a long time. I remember being in high school and finding out from my two friends who had started having sex before the rest of us that they never actually had an orgasm. I was shook because I just assumed that sex meant orgasms. Even now in college, I hear so many stories of hook ups where the guy will expect a blow job and then conveniently fall asleep immediately afterwards.

The scary part for me is that this seems to be the norm and a lot of the time, women don't even seem to question it.

Nick: Yeah, I've heard that, too, from my female friends. They're basically too embarrassed to talk with their partner that they're not doing a decent job. So they just don't say anything.

Maggie: Yeah. That feeling of embarrassment is so real and definitely so common. But I want to note that it is there because of power dynamics, right? Like, knowing that societally, people who have been socialized as men inherently hold power. That makes it difficult to have these conversations.

We want to acknowledge that this is a whole other thing but that normalizing conversations about sex, enthusiastic consent and respecting boundaries, not only can lead to more pleasure for all involved, it can also directly challenge rape culture.

When we talk more honestly and openly about what we do and don't want and what does and does not feel good, the "grey" areas around consent become a lot more black and white.

Nick: There's another piece of the puzzle.

Maggie: Yeah. And I think that completing this puzzle is a lifelong process.

Nick: So, what's the next step? Why are we even recording this podcast right now?

Maggie: When I think about my 14-year-old self and how many misconceptions I had about sexual health and wellness, this podcast would have been everything for me. We are just now talking about it. Think about how impactful learning about this could have been for us, like, seven years ago.

Nick: Yeah, I think we've all been duped. Talking with my friends and from my own perspective, most of us want to be good at "the sex" but it's hard to be good when you aren't taught how to have conversations that include everyone.

Maggie: Bazinga.

Nick: Did you really just say bazinga?

Maggie: Nothing but love and respect for Sheldon Cooper. Just kidding.

But, actually, eliminating the pleasure gap does not just mean straight women get orgasms. It means everyone having sex has more pleasure and enjoyment. We can all be better partners and it sucks that these conversations aren't normalized because it makes things harder and less fun for all of us.

I also want to note that we talked a lot about orgasms today but looking for increased boundaries and conversations about comfort and consent all lead to increased pleasure.

Nick: That sounds like a win-win.

Maggie: Thank you all for listening to us talk about pleasure. Stay safe out there. Cue, "Let's Hear it for the Boys."

(MUSIC: Deniece Williams - Let's Hear it for the Boy)

*'Cause every time he pulls me near
I just wanna cheer
Let's hear it for the boy
Let's give the boy a hand
Let's hear it for my baby
You know you gotta understand*

END