

Thoughts from a sex and relationship therapist (Juliet Grayson)

Here are ten things that I have learnt as a sex and relationship therapist. I'm in the very privileged position, as a couples therapist, to get a real insight into the lives of other people. I probably know some aspects of my clients better than anyone else. I also get an amazing view of how people think about sex and relationships. When I see people for a session on their own, there is no point in them lying. They share how they really think about intimacy, lovemaking and their partner.

1) Men and women really do have different attitudes to sex. Of course this is a generalisation, but many men have told me that for them sex is largely a recreational activity. And yet for the majority of women there needs to be an emotional component for sex to be really satisfying. I am struck over and over again by how differently we think about sex. One of my male clients said to me, "Having sex is like having a cup of tea with someone." Not many of my female clients would agree with this!

2) Relationship challenges will hit every couple at some point. Even the couples who look like they are very much together and in love will go through tough times. As David Schnarch said, "Relationships are people-growing machines." In other words they offer us the opportunity to develop into emotionally mature adults who can thrive effectively in the world.

3) Being with my clients and seeing their struggles can act as a mirror for me. Sometimes a client might say "I hate it when my wife tries to tell me what to do." On the inside, a little voice says to me, 'You do that to your husband Juliet! And he hates it too.' So being with my clients provides frequent reminders of the importance of prioritising my relationship, and giving both the relationship and my husband, the attention that they deserve.

4) I've had clients who are worried about their low level of sexual desire. This may not be a problem if both partners have a similar low level of desire. Then, their main challenge is to accept that their relationship is working really well for them. They may have to adjust to the fact that they have less sexual contact than their friends. But if they're both genuinely happy with that, fantastic! They can be affectionate, and are lucky to have found another person with a similar level of sexual drive.

5) Most people don't realise how much their childhood impacts their thoughts feelings and reactions as an adult. Training as a couple therapist, and as a Pesso Boyden System Psychotherapist (PBSP) has really made me see how many of the problems we experience as adults will have their root in our experiences as children. For example, the man who felt controlled by his wife realised that his mother had been controlling. The woman who found herself being compliant with her husband, apparently agreeing with him when in truth she disagreed but didn't tell him, had been trained to behave in this way by her aggressive father. Helping people to see the root of their behaviour, and give them a different experience in a PBSP session, completely changes how they react in their adult relationship. Pesso Boyden System Psychotherapy is the most effective method I have found for this. After their PBSP session, a client will tell me, "Things that I perceived as problematic before, no

longer have the same heat. I can see now that it is okay for him to do that. In fact it is normal. I no longer overreact! Which is such a relief to both of us.”

6) There is another way that childhood experiences will affect some of us. A lack of good parenting can create a longing for something in the adult, that we should have experienced as a child. It's common for people in the romantic phase of a new relationship to imagine that their partner will give them the love, approval, support and/or protection that they should have had as a child. We may meet our new partner and think, “This is it. He (or she) really understands what I need, and is willing to give it to me.” It's incredibly exciting. However, the new boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't sustain this. This is because (according to PBSP) this need has to be met at the *right* age, the age of the original wounding. This means that my boyfriend in the ‘here and now’, can never fully fill the hole that was created by my father in the ‘there and then’ of my childhood. In the blissful stage of a new relationship they are willing to try, and initially it seems to work. But after a while both parties realise that it isn't sustainable. As the needy one demands more, the giver feels drained, and starts to give less. The needy one becomes even more demanding, and the giver feels they have to withdraw further. They are now in a vicious circle that can never be satisfied. The only way I know to heal this is using Pesso Boyden System Psychotherapy, which uses group members to role-play symbolic figures (an Ideal Mother or an Ideal Father) who can say, “If I'd been there when you were six, as your Ideal Father, I would have loved you, accepted you, supported you and/or protected you in just the way that you needed.” When this message is delivered in the right way in a client session it can be amazingly effective at filling the hole that was left by the lack in childhood. It works because the message is being sent to the person at the *right* age (when the client was six-years-old).

7) I always say to people in a new relationship, “Don't do anything in the first thirty days that you're not willing to do for the next thirty years.” Many of us are too generous in the early phase of a relationship, when we want to impress the other person, and are willing to put ourselves out. We set unrealistic expectations in our partner, only to disappoint them later.

8) Our behaviour is ahead of our values. Most people have a set of values which they intend to honour, yet few of us manage this. It might be that I have a value on honesty, but I find myself lying. It might be that I have a value on generosity, and yet I am mean. It might be that I have a value on connection, and yet I withdraw. Over and over again I see people failing to live up to the values they aspire to, not managing to behave in ways that they want to.

9) It's really important to make the distinction between identity and behaviour. Who I am, my identity, is a core part of me. What I do, my behaviour, is what other people see. Behaviour is at a more superficial level than identity. In our culture we often confuse the two. We might say to a little girl who has stolen some chocolate, “You are a naughty girl.” It would be better to say, “That was a naughty thing you did.” In the same way, when someone criticises us it is wise to focus on the behaviour that needs changing, rather than taking the comment at the level of identity. For example, if I'm accused of being lazy (identity), I'll benefit from thinking about what I need to do differently (behaviour) to avoid the “lazy” label. It is easier to change my behaviour, what I do, than my identity, who I am!

10) Through all the therapy and all the client work that I've done, I would say that the most important thing I have learnt is the power of self acceptance. Until we can really love and accept ourselves, it's very hard to love and accept someone else. Along with this, many people will benefit from being a little kinder to themselves. The Pesso Boyden system has really helped me to do this.

*Juliet Grayson is a UKCP registered psychotherapist, and author of *Landscapes of the Heart: The working world of a sex and relationship therapist* (Published April 2016). £12.99 www.landscapesoftheheart.co.uk*