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How much do women talk about sex? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Do women talk about sex as much or in the same manner as guys do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Many factors influence people's ability and comfort speaking about sex, so it's difficult to attribute differences strictly to individuals' gender identities. How people talk about sex may be impacted by culture, religion, and life experiences, to name a few. Much of this reality, and even perhaps your question, is owed to the different ways people are socialized; included in this socialization process are gender roles, which often dictate what's considered appropriate behavior for one gender versus another, sexually and otherwise. The influence of gender roles might lead to some differences in how men, women, and people of other genders interact with the topic of sex.

Reader, before getting down to the differences in gender, it's worth noting that the vast majority of research on this topic focuses on cisgender ^[2] (a person whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender identity) heterosexual (straight) relationships; there's limited information about how those in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities talk about sex. That being said, the research suggests, when comparing genders along a binary, that those who identify as women tend to talk with their peers about sex more often than men do but may be less likely to assert themselves in sexual situations. One study of straight partners, for example, found that women who subscribed more heavily to gender norms were more likely to defer to their male partners around condom use.

In trying to understand these differences, it's helpful to return to the subject of gender roles, which frame masculinity as dominant, hypersexual, and insensitive, and femininity as submissive, sexually naive, and nurturing. People who are raised as men are often taught to be sexually experienced, in competition with other men, and capable of dominating women, while people raised as women often learn that they're supposed to be accommodating, generous, and innocent. These stereotypes and expectations may leave feminine people feeling reluctant to share their sexual needs with partners, while more comfortable having vulnerable discussions with peers about sex and intimacy. On the flip side, masculine people may be more comfortable

expressing their desires but less comfortable moving beyond joking conversations about sex. At the end of the day, strict gender roles may be confining for people of all genders; they could make people feel that there are only two options — hypermasculinity that doesn't allow for vulnerability or sexual inexperience or hyperfemininity that makes it difficult to be assertive or openly sexual.

All in all, it may help to remember that how people think, what they do, and what they say reflect the world they live in and reinforce it at the same time. Discussing sex honestly and openly, with friends and partners, has positive impacts in people's sexual attitudes, experiences, and safer sex behavior, regardless of gender. Though the social norms around sex may influence how different genders talk about it, it's worth noting that these aren't the rules — so it's great for people to talk about sex in whatever way they're most comfortable!

Alice!

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