



## Talking point: talking about sex

By Paula Hall

I'd always been rather a fan of sex. It's a fun, exciting, simple pleasure that's available to most of us, one way or another. There are many well-recorded health, psychological and relational benefits. What's more it's completely natural and free! I was only a year into my basic training with Relate to become a couple counsellor when I decided that I would definitely continue training to be a psychosexual therapist.

Sex was clearly an important part of people's lives, something that often touched them at profound depths, and I wanted to be in a position to help people reach their sexual potential. Ten years later I continue to hold the view that sex can be a wonderful, inspiring and soul-enhancing experience, but unfortunately I've also witnessed a much darker side.

Sex can devastate people's lives. It can cripple self-esteem, irretrievably break relationships, lead to depression, anxiety and even suicide. It can be cruel, humiliating, degrading and destructive. The media portrays sex as a commodity, something that all of us should want and pursue. It seems to me that over the past 50 years we've moved from a society where sex was barely mentioned and kept tightly locked behind closed doors to a place where it's impossible to escape from it. But, contrary to the way sex is often portrayed, it is not always a pleasure without price or consequence. Our sexual choices, and those of others, can come at a cost. Every day in the therapy room, on the radio and in the press, I hear the stories of how sex has screwed up people's lives. Sexual rejection, infidelity and pressures to perform or conform abound in many bedrooms. On top of that are the stories of abuse and addiction where sex can have catastrophic effects on everyday functioning and relationships. There are times when I feel like Mary Whitehouse, wanting to extol the sins of sex, but it's not sex itself that's the problem, it's what we do with it. The harsh reality is that sex is arguably not only the most profound way we humans can express ourselves and be intimate, but it can also be used as a weapon to damage ourselves or others. Sex is a messy business and it is often we therapists who are left to clear up.

I continue to enjoy being a sex therapist and I have the privileged opportunity of helping people in the most personal area of their lives. But I understand the complexity and the paradox of sex. Sex is both wonderful and dangerous. So as we endeavour to communicate the importance of 'safe sex' we must remember that it takes much more than just using a condom.