

Healthy Futures has moved!

We outgrew our old space, and are now located in the Vietnamese American Community Center in the Fields Corner neighborhood of Dorchester.

Our new contact information:

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Read more inside!



Dear Reader,

This issue of the Healthy Futures newsletter is dedicated to understanding the emotional impact of adolescent sexual activity. The emotional effects of sex are often neglected in educational materials about sexual health and research studies, but are just as real a component of health as pregnancy or disease. Students in Healthy Futures programs seem to connect most strongly with this part of our program, I think because the emotional impact of sex makes sense to them intuitively.

Recent research shows a link between sexual activity and depression, a connection not likely to be surprising to individuals who work with teens. More research is needed to understand the complex relationship between these risk behaviors, however, if only to lend scientific credibility to the action we already know is appropriate: helping teens see that waiting to have sex is the only way to protect themselves from the emotional and psychological risks of pre-marital sexual activity.

We have also included stories in this issue that teens have submitted to our website, www.doinitright.org. Although not part of a scientific study, the stories speak powerfully to the often devastating impact of sexual activity in the lives of teens.

Finally, we have listed several book recommendations that deal at least in part with the emotional effects of adolescent sexual activity. All of these books are available to borrow from our library.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and have a Happy New Year!

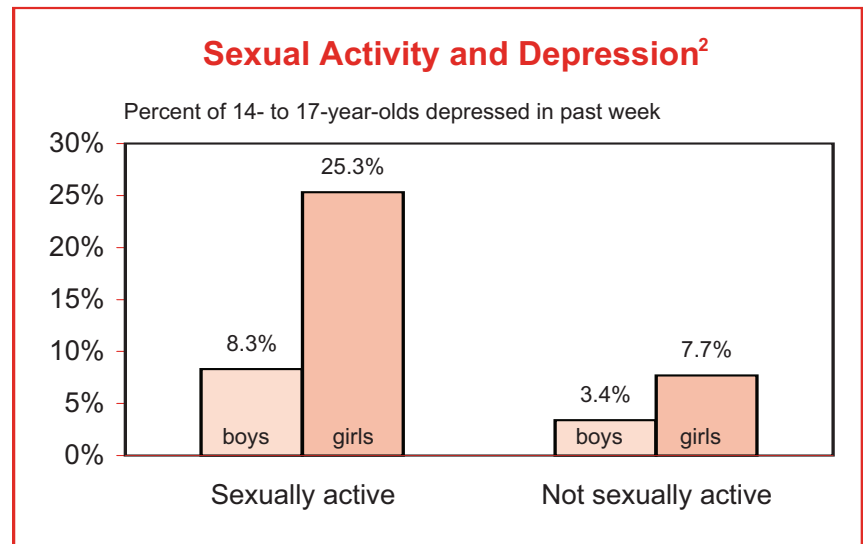
Sincerely,

Rebecca M. Ray, MPH

Healthy Futures Program Director

Depression Linked to Adolescent Sexual Activity

Recent studies analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Ad-Health) have found that teens who engage in sexual activity are much more vulnerable to depression. One study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, analyzed data from Wave I participants in the Ad-Health survey¹. Another, published by the Heritage Center for Data Analysis, examined the data from Wave II of the Ad-Health survey². Both showed a strong increase in depression and suicidal tendencies among teens who have been sexually active. Even after controlling for background variables such as gender, race, and family income or parent education, teens who have been sexually active were significantly more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide than their abstinent counterparts, as shown in the table below.



Teens express regret after becoming sexually active

These analyses support other data on the emotional health of sexually active adolescents, which show that nearly two-thirds of teens who have had sex wish they had waited longer to become sexually active³. "The fact that a majority of teens express regrets concerning their own initial sexual activity strongly suggests that such activity leads to distress and emotional turmoil among many, if not most, teens."⁴

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Educator Spotlight...



Carla Booker
Healthy Futures Educator

HF: Why do you work in the field of abstinence education?

Carla: I believe in the possibility and reality that kids can choose to wait for sex. Looking back at my life as a teenager, I never heard that being in a relationship didn't necessarily involve sex. I think that had someone come into my classroom, told me their personal story and armed me with similar information to what we teach at Healthy Futures, it would have really made an impact.

HF: What message do you most want teens to remember from what you say?

Carla: That it really doesn't matter what you've done in the past, that [abstinence] is always something you can choose for yourself. I've said it a hundred times, but it's still such a powerful message.

HF: What's the hardest thing about your job?

Carla: Even though I really enjoy going from school to school and having a variety of classroom experiences, it's also difficult to know that I'm only with students for a week and that I won't really have the opportunity to follow up with them. I hope that their teachers can pick up where we leave off and encourage them in small ways to make healthy choices about relationships and sexuality.

HF: What do you see in students' reactions or stories that speaks to the emotional impact of sex?

Carla: It seems like there are universal feelings that everyone relates to- the desire to be noticed, to be wanted, to be appreciated. I talk about that in my story and both the guys and the girls seem to resonate with it. When I tell them that sexual feelings are normal, you can see them breathe a sigh of relief. I think a lot of times kids just want to be recognized for what they're going through. But it's important for them to hear stories like mine to help them understand that sex isn't necessarily going to give them those things that they want. In fact, so often they end up regretting having sex; that regret is something I want to help them avoid.

Teen Speak

Healthy futures hears a lot from teens themselves about the emotional impact of early sexual activity. Although not part of a scientific study, the stories speak powerfully to the often devastating impact of sexual activity in the lives of teens. The following are recent submissions to the "Love? Story" section of Healthy Futures' teen website, www.doinitright.org. Many of these teens have participated in Healthy Futures classroom programs, and others saw the website advertised on subway trains or heard about it from friends.



I thought our relationship would be closer...

I liked my guy a lot up until one day when things went wrong. It all started when we started dating- it was great and everything. I thought that we were going to be together for awhile, but I thought wrong. One day when I was at his house after school, we were making out and things went too far. He [initiated non-intercourse sexual activity]. After that happened, I thought that our relationship would be closer, but yet again, I thought wrong. Instead of us getting closer, our relationship got worse. He started to get farther and farther apart. He started to verbally abuse me and threaten me. I started to get tired of it and eventually broke up with him. I really regret doing that [sexual activity] with him because when I look back at our relationship, it wasn't a really healthy relationship. To this day I don't talk to him now. **AG, 14, Chelsea, MA**

If I could bring back the past

My boyfriend was so kind to me; he would say a lot of sweet things. Then one day, we were both alone in his room he started kissing me and telling me, "I love you, baby". Well then he started getting physical. I was afraid to say "no" because I didn't want him to think that I was too childish or stupid or something like that. Well, the next day I was waiting for his call, which never came. I started calling and calling, but he never picked up my calls. Now I regret letting him do that to me. If I could bring the past back I would say "no", without caring about what he thinks of me. **CG, 14, Lawrence, MA**

In the heat of things...

It was a hot summer. So me and my boyfriend went to his house... we started kissing and then we went further and we ended up having sex. Now we broke up and we don't talk no more. Till this day I regret that we had sex!!! **KL, 13, Lynn, MA**

I never heard from him

One Friday evening I made a stupid choice. My ex and I got to talkin' and I had sex with him because I thought in my head, "He really likes me. We had been together for 3 years and 6 months, so why not do anything with him?" So, long story short, after that I found out he was messing around with a lot of other girls. I never heard from him after that until we ran into each other. He tried to talk to me again, but I just ignored him. **JC, 16, Roxbury, MA**

I wasn't respected anymore

I really liked this guy. He seemed really nice. He was cute, smart, and funny. All of the perfect qualities. Until we had a relationship. Sex to me was always a big deal and I told myself that I would never do it unless I was in love. Well with him I knew I was.

We had sex and as soon as it was over it was like right then and there I wasn't respected anymore. He didn't treat me like the one person that could make his whole day happy anymore. We continued on in the relationship and sex was just a usual thing. I kept telling myself that he loved me and that he was just going through a phase. But he wasn't. The day I knew that it was a mistake was when I found out about "her". He had been cheating on me for a while and was just using me for sex. Right then and there I ended it. **KH, 17, San Diego, CA**

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Delaying sexual activity is related to long-term happiness

Data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth linked the likelihood of long-term happiness with delaying the onset of sexual activity. For example, only a third of women who first had sex at ages 13 or 14 now say that they are “very happy”, while more than half of women who waited to have sex until their early twenties now report being “very happy” in life⁵.

Implications

Unlike with physical risks such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, experts are not aware of risk reduction strategies to help teens avoid the emotional and psychological impact of sex discussed here. Although it is still unknown whether adolescent sexual involvement leads to depression or stems from it, it is clear that any involvement in sexual activity involves psychological risk and is therefore cause for concern⁶. Teens should be educated about the potential for emotional harm from sexual activity in sexuality education courses and other venues, and be told that the only certain way to avoid this risk is to abstain from sexual activity.

1 Hallfors, D, et al. Adolescent depression and suicide risk:

Association with sex and drug behavior. *Am J Prev Med.* 2004; 27, 224-231.

2 Rector, R, K Johnson, L Noyes. Sexually active teenagers are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide. *Heritage Center for Data Analysis.* June 2, 2003

3 National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Not Just Another Thing to Do: Teens Talk About Sex, Regret, and the Influence of Their Parents. June 30, 2000.

4 Rector, R, K Johnson, L Noyes. Sexually active teenagers are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide. *Heritage Center for Data Analysis.* June 2, 2003

5 Rector, R, K Johnson, L Noyes, S Martin. The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts. *The Heritage Foundation.* June 23, 2003

6 Hallfors, D, et al. Adolescent depression and suicide risk: Association with sex and drug behavior. *Am J Prev Med.* 2004; 27, 224-231.

Staff Update

This fall, Healthy Futures welcomed two new staff members: Jenny Yoon, our new project administrator, and Vince Campbell, a new educator. They are great additions to our team and we're sure you will enjoy working with them.



Jenny Yoon
Project Administrator



Vince Campbell
Educator

Suggested Reading

All of the following books are available to borrow from the Healthy Futures resource library in Dorchester. Call 617-929-1037 or email jenny@healthy-futures.org for more information.



Unmasking Sexual Con Games

by Kathleen McGee and Laura Buddenberg

A guide to help teens avoid sexual exploitation, set healthy friendship and dating boundaries, and have successful relationships.

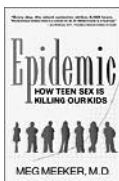


Sex and Character

by Deborah Cole and Maureen Duran

A supplemental textbook that uses character development to teach abstinence education.

Includes a chapter specifically on the emotional impact of sex.



Epidemic: How Teen Sex is Killing Our Kids

by Meg Meeker, MD

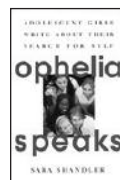
Written by a pediatrician who speaks from her own experience working with adolescents, this book deals mostly with the current STD epidemic, but includes information about the emotional impact of sex.



Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls

by Mary Pipher

Discusses many issues that plague adolescent girls, including sexuality. Includes stories from the author's work as a psychotherapist, and suggestions for how girls can maintain a strong sense of self through adolescence.



Ophelia Speaks

by Sarah Shandler

A collection of stories and poetry by teens in response to the book *Reviving Ophelia*, dealing with many of the same issues. Section on sexuality has some relevant submissions.



Real Boys' Voices

by William Pollack and Todd Shuster

A clinical psychologist shares stories of his adolescent male patients, dealing with the intense pressures they feel related to gender issues. Includes sections on sex and romance.