



Why Vanessa Marin Believes Communication is the Key to Great Sex

The sex therapist and co-author of the New York Times Best-Seller *Sex Talks: The 5 Conversations That Will Transform Your Love Life* shares her best advice for talking about desire and pleasure, and fostering intimacy.

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- Alicia Menendez: What makes great sex, well, great? If you ask sex therapist Vanessa Marin, a lot of it comes down to being able to talk about it. Thing is, those conversations can feel daunting and complicated.
- So Vanessa and her husband, Xander, have created a guide, *Sex Talks: The Five Conversations That Will Transform Your Love Life*. That book landed them on the New York Times bestsellers list, which is a testament to the need for the space they're creating. Vanessa and I talk about the different types of sexual drives, why there is no such thing as a normal sex life, and what is motivating her to build a sex and relationship advice empire. Vanessa, thanks so much for doing this.
- Vanessa Marin: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here.
- Menendez: Vanessa, who taught you about sex?
- Marin: Nobody. That was a big problem. The reason that I am a sex therapist actually does boil down to my parents' attempt at giving me the talk. But all that they could really muster up was to say, "If you have any questions about sex, you can ask us." But it was very obvious in the moment that what they were really saying is, "Please, for the love of God, do not ask us any questions. We don't want to talk about this. Let's all just stay quiet." And so, we never had any conversation other than that.
- And it was tough for me as a child because I had so many questions about sex. I was hearing things on the playground. I was curious. I had also discovered a stack of *Cosmopolitan Magazines* that the college girls who lived next door were throwing away. So actually, that might be the answer, *Cosmo Magazine* might have been what taught me about sex.
- Menendez: The challenge with learning about sex from women's magazines, at least women's magazines in the '90s, I'll be honest, I haven't picked up a women's magazine in a long time, is that it was all about how to be desired.
- Marin: Exactly.
- Menendez: It was all about selling and never about what you wanted to buy. And so, I think there's an entire generation of us who in the early part of our lives, really understood sex and desire to be about gaining someone else's attention.
- Marin: And all about making him feel good. So I mean, that was another aspect of it too. It was always assumed that you were going to be with a man and it was all about his pleasure. Do all of these tricks for him; surprise him at the front door wearing nothing but a trench

coat; cook dinner wearing heels, a thong, an apron and nothing else. And I never saw anything about my own pleasure. So that led me to have a really performative experience with sex. Once I started having it, it was all about, "What can I do? What tricks can I do to be the best?" And no attention whatsoever onto, "Well, what do I need to feel good and have fun?" Maybe I want my partner to cook me dinner in a thong and heels and nothing else.

Menendez: So if it is not your parents and it's not the women's magazine, when then do you really begin learning about sex in a way that informs the way you think about it today?

Marin: It really wasn't until I went to college and decided, "You know what? I think I can make a career out of this. I think I can be a sex therapist and help people talk about sex, get more comfortable with it." And so, I started seeking out resources of my own. And I think I went into college a little bit naive, thinking, "Yeah, I'm going to get all the resources for how to do all the stuff." And even then, it was like I could find some academic articles, a little, tiny bit of research that was done, but I really struggled to find where's the genuinely useful, practical, interesting information that I need for my own life. I'm interested in the academics of it, sure, but also for my own sex life, I want the practicalities of it. That's part of the reason I decided to create this business and write this book. I wanted to give people the resources that I felt like I never had, and that my sex life suffered because I never had those.

Menendez: The core of your work is that sex gets complicated and that communication is at the heart of unlocking great sex. Why does sex get so complicated?

Marin: Most of us get our education about sex from TV, movies, and from porn, and it never looks complicated in any of those mediums. It's always spontaneous. It's passionate. There's 30 seconds of missionary style intercourse and everybody's wildly satisfied. Sex never even gets initiated, you just give each other the look and it's on, and you're ripping each other's clothes off. I mean, every sex scene looks the same. It's kind of wild to think about. So we see sex depicted this way over and over and over again our entire lives. So of course we're going to internalize, "That's what sex is supposed to look like." And so, it's so important to me to be able to normalize with people, sex on the screen is nothing like sex in real life, and especially sex in long-term relationships, when we've been together a few years, and relationships are complicated too. Times that we are experiencing disconnection with our partner. Maybe we've had kids and it feels like the balance of the relationship has shifted in these profound ways. And our own relationship with sex can be complicated. Whatever baggage we grew up with, ways that we might struggle with our own body confidence, our own desires.

There's so many different things that can get in the way. And I don't say that to make people feel bummed out or dejected, like, "Oh, God, all this stuff is in the way." But just to normalize, it's okay if your sex life doesn't feel perfect and spontaneous and magical, that's all of us. But once we recognize and acknowledge that fact, that's the place where we can start working on, okay, well, but what is it that we need to create that intimacy and that connection that we are all so deeply craving.

Menendez: You say that one of the most common complaints you get from your patients is that they have low libido, and you introduce us to the concept of having spontaneous desire and responsive desire. Can you walk us through what that means?

Marin: Most people don't realize that there are two sex drive types, and what these two types of desire boil down to is where do we feel desire first. Do we feel it in our heads, like

mentally, "Hey, you know what sounds so good right now?" Or do we feel it in our bodies? Our bodies are starting to get excited, feeling good, getting prepared for sex. So spontaneous desire is when we get that mental idea first, "Ooh, the idea of sex sounds good, where's my partner?" And then our physical arousal has to follow. Responsive desire is what most people don't realize even exists, and research has found that most women have responsive desire. So this is why most of us feel like, "I'm low desire. I'm no desire. Something's broken. What's wrong with me?" None of that is true. It's just that you likely have responsive desire. So responsive desire is the other way around from spontaneous. We have to feel it in our bodies first before mentally it starts to sound like a good idea. So the classic sign that you might be a responsive desire is if you've ever caught yourself in the middle of sex or even at the end of sex thinking, "Huh, this is fun. Why don't I ever seem to want this?" That is a great sign that you might be responsive. So again, it's not that anything's wrong with you, it's not that you're broken, it's just that your desire works in a different way, and you need to appeal to your body first, not to your brain.

Menendez: Sex Talks covers the five essential conversations every couple needs to have. I want to leave some of it in the book, but I love the first one, and I have questions about it, which is acknowledgement, aka sex is a thing and we have it. I was surprised by that. In your experience as a therapist, I'm guessing you have people who come to you and have not had that baseline conversation.

Marin: You would be surprised by how many people have never talked openly about sex in their relationship, even being together years or decades. Or the other classic thing that happens is that the only time you've talked about sex is a fight, "Why are we never having sex? Why do you never initiate? Why do you never seem to want me?" So the vast majority of couples just don't have a positive foundation for talking about sex. It feels uncomfortable for them. So we wanted to create a very easy entry point.

Menendez: The second conversation is connection. The third talk is about desire, aka what do we each need to get turned on. We talked a little bit about that. So I'm going to move on to pleasure, aka what do we each need to feel good. Because I'm a women, gender and sexuality studies major, I have a mom who is a sex educator, I didn't blush throughout most of the book until I got to this chapter because in some ways it becomes the thorniest because now you're in it.

Marin: Yeah, we put this one forth for a reason. We're like, "Let's ease our way into it with some of these other ones." But yeah, now it's time to talk about what do we each need to feel good. And I think this is a particularly challenging topic for us women because we have spent the majority of our lives really deprioritizing our pleasure. We're also taught a lot of BS about our bodies, that they need to look a certain way, our genitals in particular, that they're kind of weird and they're complicated and they smell bad and they taste bad. So there's just so much baggage that most of us are up against when it comes to actually allowing ourselves to receive pleasure.

Menendez: There now are even more scents for your genitals. I just thought we were moving past the point of needing more products.

Marin: We actually just did a TikTok all about vaginal cleansing products, and I went into our local drugstore, picking them up and saying, "As a sex therapist, here's my rating, zero out of 10, zero out of 10." There were probably 20 or 30 different options, and ridiculous scents like island breeze, tropical coconut. And I'm like, "My vulva is not supposed to smell like an

island breeze or like cool cucumber. It's a body part." And all these products ironically can cause actual odor because we're irritating a part of our body that does a perfectly good job of cleaning itself, so that's my whole rant about that.

But we really have so many challenges when it comes to allowing ourselves to receive and understanding, "What does it even feel like for me to feel pleasure in my own body?"

Menendez: I went to my circle of Latina girlfriends to ask them what questions they had for you. And one of the things I found interesting is that basically all the questions circled around the same question, which is, "What is normal? What is healthy?" Which is a really hard question to answer, particularly around people who've been in long-term relationships. I think to your point about growing up and what you see, I remember all these sitcoms where it always felt like the dad was badgering the mom to have sex, and the mom never wanted to have sex with them. And yet, there is just some reality to if you are in a heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationship, if you layer in kids, there begins to become a more complicated question of, "How often do we need to be having sex to have a good sex life, a healthy sex life, a normal sex life?"

Marin: When it comes to sex in particular, frequency in particular, it's really understandable that for most of us sex feels like this huge, complicated issue. And of course, we feel the temptation to want to boil it down to something as simple as a number. Like, "Just tell me the number of times I need to have it in a week."

Menendez: Check it off my to-do list.

Marin: Okay, if we have it twice, then we're okay, then everything's okay, and it's just not the reality. The reality is that there's no magic number that's going to work for every couple. There are also seasons in relationships too, where you might be having more, you might be having less, depending on what else is going on in your life. So what we've found is that it's much more important to focus on the quality of the sex that you're having, because if you're trying to have sex just to hit a quota, that is not going to be enjoyable sex, and you are not going to crave that kind of sex either. One of the most powerful things in the book is we make the connection between our enjoyment of sex and our desire for it. You are not going to desire something that doesn't feel enjoyable and pleasure to you, it doesn't make any sense to. So if we want to feel more desire, focus on feeling more pleasure, enjoying the experience more, and then you'll find that a natural frequency falls into place.

Now, I know that's kind of an unsatisfying answer. People are like, "Just tell me the number." So I will say we did a survey and I think 70,000 people have filled it out at this point so far. It's not a scientific survey, but that's a good number of people. And we asked about frequency, and we found that 75% of people fell into one of three buckets, and they were evenly divided in the buckets. So the buckets were two to three times a month, once a month, and two to three times a week. We also asked them about satisfaction, and we found that there was no major differences in satisfaction. So I think that again just shows you that there's not a magic number that's going to work for everyone.

Menendez: You said that there are seasons in relationships. When does a season become climate change? When is it a crisis that has a deeper underlying meaning?

Marin: I think it becomes a crisis when you're not talking about it. So if the two of you're having a really intense dry spell, you've got a lot of other stuff going on and you're not talking about it, it's very easy for each partner to start making stories in their head about what that means. "Huh, my partner hasn't initiated sex in months. I don't even remember the last

time we had sex. Seems like they don't even care. Maybe they're not attracted to me anymore. Maybe they're thinking about divorce." We can really spiral in our own heads. But what I've found is that as long as couples are talking openly about what's going on, we can weather a lot of seasons.

And also, another tip is even if sex is feeling really overwhelming, you're in a long dry spell, you've got so much on your plate you just can't even really think about it, still prioritize other forms of physical intimacy.

So research has found that a 30-second hug and a six-second kiss can create a lot of intimacy, especially if you do those things every day. I think most of us, no matter what we've got going on in life, we can carve out 36 seconds for ourselves and our partner. So focus on those little wins too, and keep talking openly about it with each other.

Menendez: I'm going to be very real with you, Vanessa, which is when I first popped over to your and Xander's social accounts, because you're so cute and he's so cute, and the whole thing is so well lit and so well packaged, I was inclined to be dismissive of it because we live in a moment where there are so many influencers who lack expertise in the very thing that they purport to be experts in. What about the work that you do requires the education, the grounding, the degree you have? And as we look for people who we can trust to take their advice, what is your counsel about who we sift through as just giving us their personal POV and who actually has dived into the research, the work, knows their stuff?

Marin: For us, it's so important for us to lead with vulnerability. I know on social media, it's very easy to look at the reels and the professionally done pictures, and I've done that myself, of looking at other couples and thinking, "Wow, they have the perfect relationship." And so, Xander and I try really hard to counteract that, and especially in Sex Talks too, about sharing our own stories, of ways that we have gone horribly wrong. Pretty much every conversation in Sex Talks was inspired by a way that we did the exact opposite thing that we now suggest doing, and we share a lot of stories about rock bottom places in our relationship that we got into, times that we tried something new in the bedroom and it went horribly wrong. And so, we share those kinds of stories on social as well, and trying to normalize even the things that aren't so bad. Sometimes we'll just say something as simple as, "Sometimes sex, it is routine."

There is no such thing as a perfect relationship. There is no such thing as a perfect sex life, we certainly don't have either. But we do have some tools that we think are really useful, and we will tell you the ways that we've messed it all up along the way.

Menendez: I want to go back to something you said earlier, Vanessa, which is you envisioned this at the outset as a business. And anyone who has been following you has watched that business grow, taking multiple forms, the latest form of course being Sex Talks. What more do you want to do? What do you see as the ultimate vision of the empire?

Marin: I want to be the one stop shop for all things sex and relationships. My superpower is creating, so I have a million ideas for different courses and guides for more books. I just want to be that one dependable resource that people know they can turn to; know, "Okay, I'm struggling with this thing. I'll go to Xander and Vanessa." And I also want to help train more people to do this work as well. There just are not very many sex therapists in the field, and sex therapy actually isn't even a regulated term. So there's not a specific amount of training or certain training that you need to go through to become a sex therapist. So I would love to be able to train other people in a responsible way to do this work. I think there's so much need for it. And to me, being able to make the biggest impact possible

would be incredible. And I always say my goal is actually to put myself out of business. I want to live in a world where this kind of work isn't actually necessary anymore.

Menendez: Vanessa, this was so much fun. Thank you so much for doing it.

Marin: Thank you so much for having me. I've loved chatting with you today.

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