

SEX

DOWN UNDER

Information, insights
and sex education for
grown ups.

Matty Silver

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*With a foreword by
The Hon. Michael Kirby
AC CMG*



Foreword

**The Hon.
Michael Kirby
AC CMG***

* Former Judge and recipient of the Australian
Human Rights Medal 1991

Matty Silver is an accredited relationships counsellor and sex therapist. She has written this book because, difficult though it may be to believe in the present day and age, many adults are afraid, embarrassed or ashamed to speak to a stranger (or anyone) about sex. This is so, although an unsatisfactory sex life is a tremendous burden for most human beings.

It may be very much on the minds of the unsatisfied. But if they bottle up their problems and feel there is no one they can talk to, the result is anxiety, depression, stress and relationship breakdown. Sometimes even suicide. For those who do not know how (or where) to go to get basic advice, this book gives them the benefits of Matty Silver's years of experience. It deals with vaginismus, erectile dysfunction, fantasies, sexless marriages, sex toys, porn and much else besides. It is reassuring to know, based on her experience, that Matty Silver is confident and optimistic that knowledge and advice can often, perhaps usually, offer excellent outcomes.

Knowing that you are not alone with a problem about sex is important to everyone who has a problem – especially if it one that you feel obliged to keep as a big dark secret. I know this because, when I was growing up in Australia in the 1940s–50s, I thought I was the only gay in the village. My sexual orientation was something I was told by society (and its laws) to keep strictly to myself. At a time when my body was bursting with hormones, I was made aware, in no uncertain terms, that I could talk about my ‘problem’ with no one. The rules at that time were ‘Don’t ask – don’t tell’.

Getting to know other gay people was delayed for me by almost two decades. It was a sexless time. I sank my sorrows in school and university studies and endless student activities. When I met my partner Johan, when we were both just short of 30, I was feeling desperate that I would be ‘left on the shelf’. Fortunately, we met and have been together for 50 years: still going strong!

Because most gay people of my generation were forced to be silent about sex, when they discovered sex, it was like a dam bursting. They talked it about it endlessly with their partner and just about anyone else who would listen. On the whole, I think gay people are more open and candid about sex than straights: an outcome of years of loneliness and solitary practices.

In my case there was another element. Johan was a migrant to Australia from The Netherlands. Just like Matty Silver. Although he insists that his native country was not always liberated and tolerant on the subject of sex, it did have a national characteristic that was different from Australia and also most Anglophone countries. Its people are very direct and blunt with each other. They generally cannot tolerate the hypocrisy (we call it politeness) of English speaking countries. They cannot understand hang ups over nudity, relationships and sex. Everything has to be laid on the table and spoken about frankly and bluntly.

Over fifty years, one grows to understand, and then cherish, this openness and direct common sense. But for those who do not have it on tap and have an issue with their sexual lives, it is wonderful to

have this book. It sets out the answers to many of the questions that the reader was too ashamed to ask.

Not all problems of this world, including over sex, can be solved. But many can. Talking or reading about the subject can definitely help. Some problems are physiological. Some are psychological. Some are emotional. Others may have religious or cultural origins. Because of the importance of sex to the overwhelming majority of people, I applaud and praise Matty Silver for offering this book. Once, I would never have thought of writing this endorsement. But I thank Matty Silver for offering it to readers. Once I would not have written such an endorsement. I do so now because I threw off the burden of enforced silence and the pretence of hypocrisy and shame. When these barriers are overcome, life undoubtedly gets better. Some people still feel happier in the dark. I say let in the light.

Michael Kirby, *Sydney*

Acknowledgements

The first person I would like to thank is my friend Harry Williamson who designed the cover and first five chapters of my book into a ‘mock-up’ which I sent to every publisher in Australia to interest them in my manuscript. It took almost nine months and I started to believe it would never happen, but Harry kept telling me not to give up. He was sure someone would want to publish it, and he was right. Finally author Alan Whiticker convinced New Holland Publishing to take the book on.

My neighbour, brilliant editor Mari Gibson, who in 2012 worked as a sub-editor at Fairfax Media, suggested to Mindy Laube, the then online section editor for the Life and Style page, that she might be interested in my articles. Fortunately for me, Mindy liked them and from then I started writing fortnightly ‘blogs’. As English is my second language, Mari edited all the articles I wrote and she did a fabulous job, without her input I don’t think I would have been able to continue writing for this many years.

A special thankyou for Brett McCann who let me volunteer at Impotence Australia which set me on my path to become a sex therapist. He was inspirational and one of the best sex educators I know, not just for me, but for several of my colleagues who were also finishing their Masters of Sexual Health at Sydney University at that time.

I was very lucky to be invited by Dr Michael Lowy to join his regular supervision group after I started my private practice, for the professional support he and the group provided. It’s there where I met Dr Rosie King who I felt became my mentor – she was very generous with her guidance and advice, especially for women’s issues.

Over the years my best friend Marilyn Allan was always there for me, offering encouragement and feedback. Sometimes she would proofread some of my articles and could come up with humorous ideas to add. I also would like to thank Elaine Godden, my first friend in Australia, who has always been supportive of my work and helped me rewrite some of the chapters of the book. Another thank you to writer Charlene Chantiri, who came up with the title Sex Down Under, and my colleague Julie Delmar who always had time to listen to me and Sandra Taylor who twenty years ago suggested I should join Lifeline.

Special thanks to the thousands of clients who shared their intimate personal issues and concerns with me, which helped me to learn, grow and become a better and more experienced sex therapist.

A final thank you to my daughters, Ischa and Malenka Ropert, for putting up with me!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

*This book is dedicated to Brett McCann,
my friend and mentor who taught me
everything I know about Sex Therapy.*

My reason for writing this book is to break down and de-mystify some of the taboos and barriers around sex, and to encourage people to feel more comfortable talking about it. I bring to this work an open-minded and objective approach to sex – a topic that can be highly emotive and often irrational. It is an area central to people's wellbeing and one where the resolution of difficulties means a great deal to them.

I grew up in a small village in The Netherlands, a liberal country with a much healthier attitude to sex than many other cultures. During the 1970s, a time of sexual liberation, I moved to Amsterdam at age nineteen, a global hang-out for hippies and tourists. With homosexuality already decriminalised in 1811, it was seen as the gay capital of the world.

The open mindedness of the city made it the sex capital of Europe. The most famous tourist attraction was the red light district 'De Wallen' a network of alleys where prostitutes sat behind large shopfront windows, illuminated by red lights. Tourists wandered

through the streets in their thousands, on a daily basis, just to have a look. There were also sex shops, sex theatres and even a sex museum.

For several years I lived above one of these shopfronts. During that time I got to know many of the women. They were in their twenties, thirties or even older and some were married with families. In those days, being a prostitute was nothing to be ashamed of. It was considered a profession – a healthy service to society. I experienced it as a normal part of everyday life. The women were just part of it and I developed a lot of respect and understanding for sex workers.

I met my future husband, an Australian filmmaker, in the seventies and he came to live with me in Amsterdam. Some years later we moved to Australia. Over the next so many years I had some diverse and interesting jobs. One of the things that struck me during that time was the contrast between the sexual liberation I had become accustomed to in The Netherlands and what was going on in Australia.

Coming from an open-minded society that views sex as a normal part of life, it wasn't long before I realised that the sexual liberation I experienced in Amsterdam had not yet arrived in Australia, or perhaps was suppressed. For example, my first steady boyfriend was allowed to spend the night with me at my parents' place – for them, it was considered quite natural that we would sleep in the same bed. This attitude helped me guide my daughters through their teenage years by offering them the space to ask and talk about sex, which was quite unique as most of their friends' parents did not see it that way.

Around 2000 a friend suggested I look into becoming a volunteer Lifeline telephone counsellor. I did and enjoyed counselling so much that I started a course at the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP). As part of my practicum I worked in Surry Hills at the office of Impotence Australia and the Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists (ASSERT) answering telephone calls from men and women about sexual issues and concerns.

During these years I began to really understand that most Australians viewed sex very differently to the way I did. I can recall

many conversations with callers who were too inhibited to even say the words penis, sex or vagina and often they would refer to the genitals as 'down there'. I was saddened that there was such a taboo around sex, but it also gave me a light bulb moment. I decided to become a sex therapist and enrolled in the Master of Health Science (Sexual Health) course at Sydney University.

Now, almost ten years later I'm a practising relationship counsellor and sex therapist. It's my experience that most couples experiencing relationship difficulties often need help dealing with sexual issues as these often go hand in hand. Over the last decade I have combined skills in both these areas to help many couples and individuals move past sex challenges and restore fun, intimacy and respect in their relationships.

Over the past six years, I have written sex and relationship articles for many magazines and for Fairfax publications, such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. These were followed by a regular blog written for *The Huffington Post Australia*, which unfortunately closed down at the end of 2017. I also became President of ASSERT NSW, the Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists.

Sex is an area of life that historically has been directly associated with shame – one of the most devastating emotional experiences in humans. Today, this appears not to have changed much for many people. This means they feel shame or embarrassment when attempting to talk about sex in a real way and so they avoid the subject.

Shame inhibits having a healthy attitude to sex. Getting the help one needs becomes very challenging, and many couples separate because of sexual issues which could have been easily resolved with the right information.

To make our sexual experiences more fulfilling, we need to shift our attitude – sex needs to become a natural and healthy part of everyday life. I feel this is essential to our wellbeing, happiness and positive relationships.

I also feel this change in attitude is essential for the safety and wellbeing of teenagers. Due to the rapid spread of technology, information – or perhaps more often misinformation about sex – is easily available. Pornography in particular creates unrealistic expectations about what is ‘normal’ and what is not. Teenagers are having sex much younger and often do not receive the right education at home, in school or from society in general. This lack of education, when combined with the shame or taboo status of sex and the distorted ideas and images of gender roles and expectations that young people are exposed to, can have damaging consequences for their lives.

These days it is very usual for people to spend time, energy and money on looking after their wellbeing. They might do this by getting fit, eating well, taking care of their mind, body and soul so they can feel good and have a fulfilling life. But sex is an area that most people are still unwilling to spend time or money learning about. This often means that unhelpful attitudes to sex create a range of negative experiences for people. These include feelings of sexual and romantic insecurity, unhappiness in relationships or fear of getting into relationships.

The book offers readers simple tips, advice and information aimed at creating healthy attitudes to sex and dispelling many of the unhealthy myths that prevent people and couples from having a satisfying sex life. I am convinced that developing a healthy attitude to sex improves self-esteem, the quality of relationships and overall wellbeing.

The book deals, in short chapters, with many of the issues I encounter in my counselling room, and in telephone and Skype sessions all over Australia, New Zealand and English speaking Asian countries. Some of the conditions discussed within these pages may be unfamiliar or confronting, however the aim is to help readers understand that most of the issues are very commonly experienced and can be resolved.

I will share important insights from ten years’ spent helping people to move past challenges and improve their sex lives. I feel we need new attitudes to sex here in Australia and it’s my job to help people change their attitudes. Sex must come out from under the covers into mainstream discussion if we want a healthier, more caring society.