

What Does It Mean To Be Sexually Healthy? 7 Sex Experts Weigh In

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It's World Sexual Health Day (WSHD) on Sunday, September 4. I know — what is it exactly? It's a day of awareness managed by the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), a global advocacy organization committed to promoting best practices in sexual health. What does it mean to be sexually healthy anyway?

For WSHD, does everyone get free condoms? Are you supposed to have sex all day? (Albeit safe sex.) Are you supposed to get more educated about safe sex? Though various organizations around the world will celebrate in different ways, via workshops, conferences, outreach drives, and the like, you can celebrate on your own, too, by being more aware of your sexual health. Of course, sexual health means way more than what happens physically.

“The World Health Organization defines sexual health as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states on their website. “Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.”

Aside from promoting sexual health, WSHD also reminds people to be respectful of other people's sexual identity, and they hope to break down social and cultural taboos around sexuality. For instance, in terms of having a positive and respectful attitude, Karen Fratti's personal essay about having HIV is beautiful. As she so poignantly writes, “I'm not that scared about my health. I'm very scared about what you'll think of me.”

She also says, “I didn't think it could happen to me, because I am a straight white woman and grew up in a house with an *actual* white picket fence. But HIV doesn't stick to demographic stereotypes. HIV is closer than most people think.”

Fratti goes on to talk about all the inroads that have been made as far as HIV treatment since the '80s. “Every time I swallow my big, green pill, I give thanks to activists who waged an unpopular battle when I was still in diapers,” she says.

Something to think about, right? Hopefully, WSHD will continue to spread their message far and wide, too, to make people more cognizant about sexual issues — not just on WSHD, but *every day*. So, what does it mean to be sexually healthy? It means different

things to different people, but awareness is key. Here's what sexual health means to sex experts:

1. "Sexual Health Is Also General Health"

Giphy

"Being sexually healthy is a personal, self-defined concept. It means that you're enjoying your individual sensuality, sexuality, and sexual expression. But, sexual health is also general health. It has far-reaching implications: It improves longevity, decreases chronic medical illness, and can help promote happiness and improved sleep. It also can help you relax and improve mood. Sexual health is not only about sexual acts like intercourse or masturbation, but it is about intimacy, and even touch and connectedness." — **Dr. Michael Krychman, Executive Director of the Southern California Center for Sexual Health and Survivorship Medicine and co-author of *The Sexual Spark: 20 Essential Exercises to Reignite the Passion***

2. "Respecting All Genders And Sexual Orientations"

Giphy

"Sexual health is defined differently for each person. To many, being sexually healthy includes being comfortable with your own sexuality and making decisions related to and communicating about it; the ability to enjoy our sexuality, sexual pleasure and intimacy without fear, guilt, or shame; understanding the diversity of sexuality separate from just sexual behavior; respecting sexual rights; respecting all genders and sexual orientations; having access to healthcare, and the education to avoid unintended pregnancy and minimize the risk of sexually transmitted infections (and accessing treatment if needed)." — **Dr. Rachel Needle, licensed psychologist and certified sex therapist, the Center for Marital and Sexual Health of South Florida**

3. "It's Not Limited To Just Being STD-free"

Giphy

"Being sexually healthy means understanding and embracing all aspects of your sexuality. It's not limited to just being STD-free. It's the emotional, physical, and social characteristics of sexual behavior. Let's not forget sexual rights either. Having the right to say 'yes' or 'no' is interrelated with sexual health.

Signs of good sexual health include using contraception (condoms) every time you have sex, knowing the ins and outs of oral sex, anal sex, vaginal sex and masturbation, obtaining consent, knowing how the sexual organs work, being sexually satisfied, and knowing how to communicate with your partner. It's not just about how your vagina, penis, or breasts look — it's being sexually open.

The best way for men and women to protect their sexual health is by communicating with

one another and getting educated.” — **Dr. Draion M. Burc h, Astroglide TTC Sexual Health Advisor**

4. “Having Open And Honest Communication”

Giphy

“Being sexually healthy, to me, means maintaining positive and healthy relationships, using safe sex practices, making informed decisions, and having open and honest communication. Seeing your doctor for regular check-ups is important, too!” — **Dr. Jennifer Caudle, Family Physician, Assistant Professor, Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine**

5. “It Means Knowing That ‘No Means No’”

Giphy

“It’s a lot more than physical aspects of health. Of course, everyone needs to be aware of STDs. Now the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is saying that Zika may become the newest STD. Unless you are monogamous and know your partner is only sleeping with you and is disease-free, condom use is essential.

But, sexual health also overlaps with emotional health. If you are not communicating well in your relationship, your sexual connection will suffer.

There’s also attitude. A healthy sexual attitude means not making sex more important than love or than your well-being. It means knowing that ‘no means no,’ whether you or your partner is saying it. It means valuing yourself enough to say ‘no’ when you want to, so when you say ‘yes,’ you can mean it fully. Setting limits that feel acceptable to you is essential to a healthy sexual attitude. A healthy sexual attitude also means being able to communicate with each other about your likes and dislikes, what turns you on or off, and how you can enhance each other’s pleasure.” — **Tina B. Tessina, PhD (aka “Dr. Romance”), psychotherapist and author of *How to be Happy Partners: Working it out Together***

6. “Everyone Deserves To Have A Healthy Sex Life”

Giphy

“Sexually healthy to me means ‘The ability to enjoy sexual pleasure by yourself or with others.’ I do have as my motto: ‘Everyone deserves to have a healthy sex life.’ Having sexual pleasure without pain, shame, guilt, or as a duty. Enjoying sexual pleasure as a routine in your life also has added health benefits: reducing stress, regulating hormones, decreasing pain, and increasing blood flow to the genital area.” — **Dr. Dawn Michael, Certified Clinical Sexologist & Sexuality Counselor, and author of *My Husband Won’t Have Sex With Me***

7. “All [Sexual] Pillars Need To Be Aligned”

Giphy

“Sexual health is physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, cultural, and political. To truly be sexually healthy, all of these pillars need to be aligned.” — **Logan Levkoff, PhD, sexuality and relationship educator and co-author of *Got Teens?: The Doctor Moms' Guide to Sexuality, Social Media and Other Adolescent Realities***

Images: Andrew Zaeh for Bustle, Giphy