

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH

Joyful Sexuality

A Vermont Approach to Primary Sexual Violence Prevention

Joyful Sexuality marks the beginning of a new perspective in the sexual violence prevention movement. Since 2001, Vermont's Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force's workgroup on Joyful Sexuality has focused its work on the concept of Joyful Sexuality as Sexual Violence Prevention. The mission of the Joyful Sexuality approach is to shift the cultural norm toward joyful and healthy sexuality by creating opportunities for individuals and communities to explore, reclaim, and discover a deeper and more expansive understanding of how sexuality informs our humanity. Toward this mission, Joyful Sexuality promotes a sense of joyful and healthy sexuality as a critical step toward ending sexual violence.

The Joyful Sexuality Workgroup began its work with the goal of deconstructing negative violent understandings of sexuality and exploring ways to reconstruct joyful, healthier ways of both teaching about sexuality and preventing sexual violence. The members of this group explored Joyful Sexuality through intentionally experiencing their senses. They began to regain a broad organic definition of sexuality by listening to music and poetry, writing, cooking, eating, finger painting, and talking. Recognizing that the sense of joy and self and connectedness that is often held by children is at the core of joyful human sexuality, the group identified that prevention might most effectively focus on helping children retain that sense and helping adults reclaim it.

Joyful Sexuality is a primary prevention strategy that is flexible enough that it can be adapted for many audiences or the specific needs of a group. Primary prevention involves efforts to reduce the incidence of a problem among a population before it occurs. In terms of domestic violence and sexual assault, primary prevention strategies introduce new values, thinking processes, and relationship skills to particular population groups that are incompatible with violence and promote healthy, non-violent relationships. In general, prevention programs are intended to clarify inappropriate attitudes and behaviors and provide positive alternatives. The Joyful Sexuality approach embraces these components while fostering positive, holistic messages intended to influence broad

change throughout the lifespan.

The architects of Joyful Sexuality in Vermont offer this vision: We envision a culture where adults will feel free to invite wonder back into their lives and teach their children the fullness of human sexuality; where connectedness and sensual delight move freely within individuals and throughout their lives; where adults and children are whole and sexually healthy.

The Joyful Sexuality approach to sexual violence prevention work is a natural extension of the work that we have been doing for years. For as long as we have been fighting sexual violence with definitions, disheartening statistics, and rape deterrence, we have intuitively strived for ways to bring in the positive; to balance the scales so that people come away with a sense of empowerment as well as important information. Joyful Sexuality accepts as true that people will be less likely to use sex or sexuality as a weapon against others in a world that respects one's sexuality as part of one's humanity.

Joyful Sexuality is a philosophy, an approach, a dream, and an attitude. Joyful Sexuality reclaims one's sense of sexuality from a culture that separates our sexual selves from the rest of our wholeness (intellectual, spiritual, social, physical, expressive, and sexual). Like most primary prevention efforts, the Joyful Sexuality philosophy encourages a shift in societal norms. Children, teens, and adults learn to appreciate their own 'sexuality' in all of its wholeness, and as connected to their wholeness as a person.

Primary prevention programs seek to create a sea change in the existing culture. They take a long time. One of the benefits of the Joyful Sexuality approach is a more immediate reaping of benefits. The positive changes begin first with the prevention staff. In the short time that we've been doing Joyful Sexuality work in Vermont, we have begun to see changes among sexual violence prevention educators. We have felt a sense of rejuvenation in sexual violence prevention work and a renewed sense of purpose and positive direction. Greater changes will follow and prevention programs are taking their first steps to include Joyful Sexuality thinking into their work with children, teens, adults, and survivors of sexual violence. These results

will take longer to manifest, the seeds of change are there. As one advocate put it, "It seems to be bubbling up all over the state". This is the beginning of the sea change in Vermont.

Within our own Vermont group, incorporating a Joyful Sexuality approach has taken on different forms for each of us working in separate, but related, fields. We have worked to help children and teens resist the negative influences of their environment (sexist media, violence, peer pressure, etc.), and have supported positive interpersonal growth and respectful relationships with their peers. We have shifted our focus of child sexual abuse prevention and education for children and their parents to encourage using correct language for all body parts, talking regularly and naturally about sexuality, and building foundations that will allow children to feel comfortable and confident in their bodies. Such healthy communication can break the dangerous practices of silence and secrecy so necessary to sexual assault. Children can ask for help. Perpetrators will choose to stay clear of children who CAN and DO talk openly about healthy sexuality to the adults in their lives.

The tasks at hand for Sexual Violence Prevention Advocates are challenging and exciting: to support a shift toward incorporating joyful and healthy sexuality into sexual violence prevention work; to support a shift toward cultural understandings that allow children and youth to experience and express their sexuality - rather than feel forced to consider it in a narrow and scary box; and to support adults in exploring, discovering and reclaiming personal understandings of intimacy, sensuality, and sexuality. We are delighted to offer the world Joyful Sexuality. ▼

➔ Reprinted with permission from the introduction to the manual "Joyful Sexuality: A New Look at Sexual Violence Prevention," which was written by sexual violence prevention advocates from Vermont, including representatives from nonprofit agencies and UVM staff.

➔ For more information, contact Amy Torchia at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, amy@vtnetwork.org or call (802) 223-1302 x 26.



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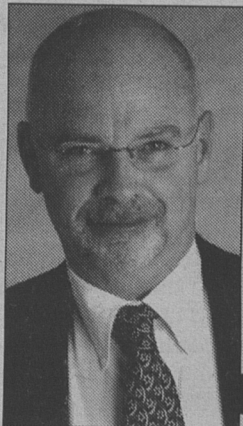
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