

“Integrating Sexuality and Spirituality” (ISIS) The Landmark Study that Shows How Women (and Men)

Can Integrate Sexuality and Spirituality and Transform their Lives

In the late 1990s, I conducted a survey to investigate the nuanced feelings and meanings of sexual experience—the first nationwide sex survey to venture beyond the performance aspects, which had been painstakingly quantified in some 700 earlier sex surveys. The ISIS survey was answered by 3,810 women and men, ages 18-86, from every state in the U.S. These respondents were from diverse backgrounds, political attitudes, and sexual orientations as well as from 22 religious faiths. Both quantitative and narrative responses revealed extraordinary information about how we might expand our view love, lust, intimacy, commitment, affairs, nurturing, empathy, communication, safety, abuse, trauma, ecstasy, spirituality, religion, culture—and much more.

The ISIS study took ten years to complete—a journey that included visiting scholarships at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, Harvard Divinity School’s Center for the Study of World Religions, and The Wellesley Centers for Research on Women. And yes, an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show.

The ISIS methodology is reported in a peer-reviewed paper published by the [Wellesley Centers for Research on Women](#). The ISIS research, findings, and clinical applications are outlined in [The Heart and Soul of Sex \(2006\)](#) and [The Return of Desire \(2008\)](#). ISIS work continues to develop in the workshops and trainings, which are constantly being updated in the [Events](#) section of this website. It also continues in the ISIS Network, an international collaboration of health practitioners whose mission is to expand the practice of therapy and sex therapy beyond limiting notions of function and dysfunction.

Major Findings of the ISIS Study

Results of the ISIS study challenge the sexual norms of performance and dysfunction, intercourse and orgasm. Thousands of ISIS respondents offer evidence to affirm what many women and men have been experiencing, or longing for: intense emotional contact and a sense that erotic satisfaction includes much more than it is possible to count and measure; it may also include compassion, altruism, vision, and even, intimations of mystical grace.

Finding #1: Sexual response is multidimensional, including body, mind, heart, and spirit

This finding suggests that sexual experience goes beyond physical performance to include how we think and feel, and what sex means in our lives—a finding that concurs with the latest neuroscience about the interactivity of the human brain—male as well as female.

Finding #2: Desire and satisfaction are embedded in relationship

This finding suggests that the basis of true eroticism is relationship—with ourselves, with our

partners, and with a power greater than ourselves—whatever we choose to name that power. It also involves our taking the risk to create intentions for our own sexual happiness—a finding that is consistent with the most empowering psychological and spiritual thinking.

Finding #3: Sexual satisfaction may increase with age rather than go downhill

This finding suggests that sex does not have to decrease after menopause, it may reach new heights. Respondents over age 50 reported more eye contact, laughter, sharing, and less angst about religious and societal issues—a finding that challenges current medical and pharmaceutical biases that dictate increasing need for performance-enhancing drugs.

Finding #4: Integrating sexuality and spirituality can heal sexual wounds and open “doors to the universe”

This finding suggests that broadening our sexual horizons can help us transcend guilt, shame, and debilitating cultural messages such as “good-girls-don’t” and “real men score.” A multidimensional view of sexuality and intimate relationships encourages self-esteem and promotes sacred union— a finding that corresponds with the law of attraction about enhancing health, healing, and drawing positive energy into our lives.