

Masturbation and Fantasy

Masturbation is one of the most common sexual expressions during the childhood years.

—Robert Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*

- ◆ Did you fantasize or masturbate as you were growing up?
- ◆ How did you feel about it? Did you feel guilty, fine, or ambivalent?
- ◆ Did you use masturbation, compulsively, to soothe yourself because your life at home was frustrating and upsetting?

Masturbation and fantasy play an important role in sexual development. In the very first few years of life, many girls and boys discover the pleasures of genital stimulation, if parents permit this. Later in childhood, masturbation provides a way of getting to know one's body, an experience of linking genital touch with pleasure, and a concrete sense of owning one's body and its functions. In adolescence, masturbation provides a way to acquaint and reacquaint oneself with one's constantly changing body and a substantive self-knowledge of what feels good sexually. Once the body has matured sexually, self-pleasuring allows an adolescent a chance to learn about his or her own physiology—erection and ejaculation, or lubrication and orgasm, and to experience the entire sexual response cycle.

Fantasizing about being with a person to whom one is attracted sexually prepares one for initiating adult relationships. Combining fantasy,

masturbation, and sexual pleasure allows the adolescent to “practice” for a wished-for sexual encounter, integrate him or herself as a sexual being, and begin to feel more sexually competent.

Whether you fantasized or masturbated (or both) in adolescence and how you felt about it if you did had more of an impact on your sexuality than you may be aware of. Masturbation and fantasy are normal, natural activities, which, at their best, have many benefits for sexual development and self-growth.

However, some young boys and girls who grow up in an unempathic family discover the powerful link between consoling themselves and sexual pleasure. Then, when they're really angry and feel hurt and unloved by their parents, they masturbate to feel better. When there is an ongoing struggle between parent and child, the fantasies during masturbation can focus on control, dominance, or revenge. In addition, masturbation may be used compulsively to overcome feelings of emptiness. In these instances, masturbation and fantasy can interfere with your ability to have a healthy sexual relationship.

Whether or not *you* masturbated in adolescence, most of your peers did. Teenage girls are statistically less likely to masturbate than boys, but many do. In one study (Hunt 1974) one-third of the female respondents and two-thirds of the males reported having masturbated by the age of thirteen. Even now, with all the focus on teenagers having intercourse, masturbation still is probably the most commonly occurring sexual activity among adolescents. Sexual and/or romantic fantasies about peers, teachers, siblings, and others are common among adolescents, regardless of gender.

At its best, in the context of a loving, permission-giving family environment, masturbation and fantasy (without guilty feelings) can play an important role in enhancing an adolescent's sense of him- or herself as an increasingly competent, mature, sexual adult (see chapter 10 for more about adolescence). Masturbation, as well as fantasy, can be practice for pleasurable future sexual encounters.

I had feelings in my vagina when I was a teenager, but I wasn't sexually active yet. I didn't know how to masturbate. I tried touching myself with my fingers, which didn't do much. I tried using a carrot! That felt sort of good, but too weird. It wasn't until much later that I did some reading and learned about vibrators. That worked great. I felt a real sense of accomplishment when I could give myself an orgasm.

—Adele, 30

Boys and Masturbation

Many boys from all kinds of families discover their penis and the pleasure it can bring at a young age. Masturbation can be a way of exploring one's body and coming to terms with changes in how the body functions. It can be a way of assuring oneself that sexual urges are normal and natural. Boys are likely to make this explicitly sexual exploration a social experience in a way that girls don't.

I have great memories of the time I spent hanging around with the boys in the neighborhood. We had a lot of fun together, and they taught me all about sexuality. Boy, we were really girl crazy. We just loved girls.

I was one of the youngest ones in the group. They kind of initiated me. They showed me how to masturbate. I had never done it. One guy had a whole stack of girlie magazines, and we used to masturbate with them. We used to talk about making love to girls. It was funny, we used to believe that if you knew just the right way to touch a girl, she would just go crazy for you. I look back on these memories quite fondly.

—Craig, 47

As sociologist John Gagnon commented (1972, 239), "These secret meetings engender guilt and anxiety, but at the same time, by publicly and socially acting out their newfound sexuality, the boys cement their own sense of themselves as sexual beings, and help each other through what often are sad feelings at the emotional separation from childhood and their parents. These male-male discussions and comparisons serve to regularize and order and further motivate the sexual behavior."

Girls and Masturbation

For girls, guilt-free masturbation and fantasy also are healthy, solidifying their sense of themselves as sexual beings, giving them self-confidence, and teaching them about their bodies:

I remember, at about age six or so, learning how to masturbate for the first time. I was playing around in the tub, and discovered that if I ran water over my vulva, I got all kinds of good feelings. As I got older, I

experimented more and more with the water in the tub, and then I learned that I could give myself an orgasm with my fingers. That freed me up from the bathtub, and gave me many, many hours of nighttime pleasure in my bed. By the time I was an adolescent, I could give myself really strong orgasms. I thought it was a pretty neat trick!

Actually, the first time I had intercourse with a boy, at eighteen, my first year in college, I was surprised that the experience was not nearly as satisfying as what I could do for myself! I finally figured out, and pretty quickly at that, that I better teach my boyfriend how I like to be touched. Then, I really liked intercourse.

Another big benefit of my great skill at masturbation was that I was able to use it to lessen my sexual tensions, especially in between boyfriends.

—Sandra, 38

Sandra's experience was wonderfully liberating, sexually. Clearly, she benefited by being in charge of her own sexual pleasure. She also incorporated a new sense of herself into her body image, and initiated herself, at her own pace, into sexual adulthood. Sandra's situation as a girl isn't all that common. If you had a similar experience, you were lucky, indeed.

In most cultures about which we have information, masturbation is more common among boys than among girls. And although many girls masturbate in adolescence, the context is very different than among boys. There is no huge upsurge in sexual behavior during girls' adolescence, and no group sexual behavior which legitimizes and socializes it.

Parents are much more protective of girls. Sociologist John Gagnon comments that instead of getting socialized to become sexual beings, girls are trained in "docility." What they are taught about menstruation is tied to reproduction, not sexuality. And the discussions, reinforced by peers and parents alike, are about love, romance, and marriage. Unless a girl has been hypersexualized by sexual abuse, or an overly sexualized family environment, fantasies are more likely to be romantic and vague, rather than genital.

I didn't date in high school, and I don't remember having any sexual fantasies. I didn't even consider masturbating. The sense of myself that I got from my father and brother teasing me convinced me that no one would want me, sexually or in any other way. I don't think I believed that I was attractive until my late twenties, and it was only then that I really explored masturbation and sexual relationships with others.

—Selena, age 56

Problems with Masturbation

Guilt

For children and adolescents to learn about their sexuality, they need permission, as well as freedom of time and space, to masturbate. We have seen that at its best, masturbating provides a way to “practice” having intercourse. It can lead to feelings of pleasure and competence. But, if the child is raised in a very negative sexual environment, masturbation can lead to guilt, depression, self-disgust, or self-labeling as immature and perverted.

I was told that masturbation was “bad” for people physically and emotionally

—Sherry, 43

In adolescence, at fourteen or fifteen, I was caught experimenting sexually with a same sex friend. I was not spoken to for a month. I felt terribly ashamed, alone and isolated. I still tend to feel that sexual expression is something to be ashamed about and that it must be done in great secrecy.

—Tim, 26

For a long time, I felt masturbation was a childlike thing, which left me feeling guilty.

—Greg, 30

John came from a family that didn’t touch affectionately at all and who thought sex was dirty. What he learned in his family was to split people into two camps: the “good” people, who weren’t sexual, and the “nasty” people, who were. As an adult, of course he wanted to be able to enjoy sex, but he had a tough time. He had a lot of trouble picturing himself as a “sexy” person. When he would make love to his wife, Jenny, if he began to lose his erection, he couldn’t use fantasy to arouse himself because he had no sexual fantasies.

As it turns out, he had not masturbated as an adolescent at all—not in private, and not in groups. Besides the family prohibition on masturbation, there was no place to go to be alone! The house was small and he lived in an attic alcove that had no door. The only safe place to be alone was in the shower, and even then,

his mother walked in and took things out of the medicine closet while he was in the shower. Because he didn’t have permission, or any place, or any way to practice being sexual, his sexual identity remained tentative and childlike.

In adult men, an inability to be successful with erections and intercourse sometimes turns out to be tied to a history of having been inhibited from masturbating as an adolescent. In most cases, it isn’t the lack of masturbating, *alone*, which causes the problem. But when a lack of experience masturbating combines with an earlier block in sexual unfolding, such as an absence of touch, a poor body image, a sex-negative family, or poor social skills, sexual development can get derailed.

Lance suffered lifelong erectile difficulties, caused by a series of developmental factors, including lack of permission, body image problems, and an adolescent fear of masturbation. He grew up in the Texas Bible Belt, in a family of hard-working factory workers. Lance married Susan a year ago. They began sex therapy because Lance had never been successful at having an erection, and they had never completed intercourse. Susan was in a lot of distress and felt that she was not sure she could stay married to Lance, much as she loved him, if his sexual difficulties weren’t solved.

As his history unfolded in sex therapy, it became clear what had happened. Lance had been a shy boy, and very overweight. His parents were loving, but they firmly believed that most aspects of sexuality were sinful, including masturbation and premarital sex. Lance revered them, and he took their attitudes to heart.

As a young boy, he always felt shy and defective about his weight. He was teased about it in school, and he grew to feel ashamed of his body.

When he was about ten, he had some experiences running around with a group of older boys, and listening to them talk about masturbating. They didn’t feel bad or sinful about it, and they described and illustrated ejaculating. Lance was younger and not sexually mature yet, but he was curious.

He went home, and guiltily, he tried to masturbate. He found the experience upsetting. He felt dirty, didn’t experience touching his penis as pleasurable, couldn’t fantasize, and since he wasn’t sexually mature yet, it “didn’t work” (he couldn’t ejaculate). Furthermore, masturbating made him focus on his defective body image, which made him more anxious.

He tried masturbating a few more furtive times, after he got older, also without enjoying it. He had mild anxiety that something was "wrong with him" sexually, but he convinced himself that when he finally was ready to meet the right girl and get married, everything would be fine. He gave up on masturbation and fantasy.

In agricultural college, at nineteen, he got serious with a girl. He felt so committed to her that he no longer felt it would be sinful to be sexual. He was okay with kissing and touching, but when it was time to have intercourse, he was so frightened that he couldn't get an erection. Now, he became really worried. What was wrong with him?

A year later, he met Susan. The performance problems persisted, and they entered sex therapy.

Lance finally became potent, after almost two years of sex therapy focusing on his guilt about masturbating, the tie-in to his body image, and activities designed to help him to enjoy fantasizing and masturbating.

Ron came into sex therapy, referred by a urologist, complaining of an inability to ejaculate with his girlfriend. Ron wouldn't masturbate at all, and he had terrible nonspecific prostatitis, as a result. Gender identification problems and disgust with masturbation seemed to be major contributors to his physical and psychological problems.

Ron had grown up with his brother, raised by his mother in a single-parent household. Ron's father had deserted his mother for another woman when Ron was nine. Ron has vivid memories of his mother, depressed and crying, when his father left. The father moved to another state, and stayed in loose contact with his two children.

Ron loved his mother very much, and was grateful to her for being such an attentive, concerned parent. As a kid, he felt understood by her and liked to talk to her for hours and hours. He had nothing good to say about his father.

Looking at Ron's past, a number of things became apparent. First, a major dynamic was Ron's disgust at the normal sexual behavior of his own gender. He thought that men were "idiots, ruled by their cocks and their sexual passions . . . they take what they want and then leave." Because he felt so strongly about men being

aggressive and treating women as sexual objects, Ron refused to masturbate and fantasize as an adolescent.

Even when told that masturbation would probably cure his prostatitis, Ron refused to masturbate. He hated using fantasy materials to get aroused, and his feelings of disgust were so strong that he felt no pleasure during masturbation.

Ron was an ardent feminist who believed that men took advantage of women, and he had very strong moral ideas about what kinds of sexual behavior were permissible between men and women. He spent a lot of time talking with his girlfriend, paying attention to her thoughts and feelings. The other issue contributing to his inability to ejaculate with his girlfriend was his fear of eventually hurting her. He wasn't sure that he would marry her. Unconsciously, he equated intercourse and ejaculation with a major commitment. Ron didn't want to be a "jerk" like his father, who he felt had used women and then thrown them away. He was acting out his fear of hurting his girlfriend by withholding his semen.

Evolution may have planned the urge to masturbate on purpose. Apes do it, dogs and cats do it, elephants do it, and even porcupines do it. Boys and men may be programmed to do it in an effort to increase fertility, because new sperm are formed continuously.

Storing seminal fluids for long periods can cause prostate congestion, which can then lead to urinary or ejaculatory distress. Regular ejaculation, either through masturbation or intercourse, can help ward off the kind of prostatitis that Ron had (which is also called "priest's disease" or "sailor's disease.")

Bart was another adult whose adulthood sexual problems stemmed from issues where blocks about masturbating combined with prior developmental obstacles. Bart's parents' poor marital relationship interfered with his sexual identity as a man. Bart had never been successful keeping his erection during intercourse, and came into sex therapy with his girlfriend as a result.

Bart grew up, one of two children, in an unhappy home. He loved his mother, but hated his father. His father treated his mother quite badly. The father was physically abusive toward her on a number of occasions, and Bart tried to intervene and stop him.

Bart's mother turned to him for companionship and compassion. She took him with her everywhere, and told him all of her problems. She also was incredibly intrusive.

When Bart was an adolescent, she actively interfered in his masturbating. Bart's bed had a wooden headboard and was placed next to a wall. If his mother heard his bed rattling around, she would come in and tell him to "stop thrashing around and go to bed." She also came into the bedroom to "check him" at night, supposedly because she wanted to make sure that her teenaged son was properly covered with the blankets—Bart got the clear message that he was not supposed to masturbate.

At the same time, like Ron, Bart felt a lot of self-hate at becoming a man. He couldn't allow himself to fantasize about being sexual with a woman because he didn't feel good about relationships between the sexes.

Bart didn't have many experiences with women as a teenager. Because he didn't feel good about leaving home and leaving his mother alone in the house with his abusive father, Bart commuted to college from home his first year.

Although he left home and went away to college the next year, being sexual with women didn't feel comfortable or familiar to him. The first time he actually tried to have intercourse, he couldn't get an erection. This set up a pattern of performance anxiety that persisted until he sought treatment, over twenty years later.

One of the changes in adolescence (see chapter 10) is a newfound ability to think abstractly and symbolically. Moral categories and oppositions (good and evil, purity and degradation) and gender role activities (aggression and submission, control and freedom) can become attached to masturbating. In the examples of Bart and Ron, the boys' family histories and disturbed gender identifications invested masturbation with special, upsetting meanings.

Objectification

Most adolescent boys don't worry about the "politics" of the fantasies they are using when they masturbate. In early adolescence, many sexual fantasies, especially for boys, are of desired "sex objects"—not real people with their own needs and desires. But if your early rearing was empathetic and power was handled well, at your core, you believe it is safe to trust and love. As you mature into an older adolescent, you begin to integrate your

sexual urges and desires and fantasies with a wish to be emotionally close to your partner.

However, if your parents were emotionally absent, or harsh and un-supportive, then your adolescent masturbation fantasies might have involved a script about being in control or getting revenge on women, and you might never mature to a stage where you want to be both sexually and emotionally close to another person.

Martin came from a family that was unempathic and distant, and even in his twenties, the way he talks about his dates with women, clearly indicates that he doesn't really see women as whole people—just bodies and sexual organs to be conquered:

"Well, I was hoping that you could help me get my erection back sooner than it comes back these days. I'm dating a couple of girls now, and it's really great, you know, having all that sex. This one girl, she's really pretty. And she gives me oral sex, which is great. So I go out with her a lot. But I like to see a couple of girls over the weekend, and have sex. But, I'm upset, because if I had sex a couple of times on Friday with one girl, then sometimes on Saturday, I can't even get it up with the next girl. And that's not right. I'm only twenty-two. What can I do so that I can have sex a couple of times each night?"

Male Masturbation: Helpful or Hurtful?

What goes on in boys' secret society of masturbation may be "predatory" by today's politically correct standards. Yet, some amount of "objectifying" women in fantasies may well be a necessary component of heterosexual male sexual development. As we sex therapists see fairly frequently, adult males who are afraid of hurting their partner with their erect penises have difficulty performing the sexual act. The masturbation-group's socially sanctioned, acted out aggressive performances may help them get over this fear.

Among heterosexual men, someone like Martin has had too much practice objectifying women, and not enough empathy and attachment to the real women in his life. He uses women sexually and can't connect to them emotionally. It's likely that even if he "falls in love" and marries at some point, his sexual arousal might be more tied to how his partner looks than to any deep feelings he might have about her.

On the other hand, Bart and Ron have the opposite problem. They were deeply scarred by their father's selfish behavior. They are over-identified with their mothers, unseparated, and literally disgusted by their own gender because of the way their fathers acted. Bart and Ron are so fearful of male aggression and genital sexuality, that they can't let themselves feel lust. Their lack of practicing masculine, genital sexuality—through fantasy and masturbation—in adolescence led to anxiety and performance problems with women later on.

Guilt-free masturbation, in John's case, would have helped him have a better marital relationship. Between his parents' sex-evasive and sex negative attitudes and the lack of affection in his family, his sexual growth was stunted.

Early adolescent boys' fantasies aren't necessarily adult fantasies; the women aren't fully human. They are just sex toys. But if the pre-adolescent environment is a caring, trusting one, with healthy gender identity models, if the boys aren't controlled or punished harshly, and if their social skills are good enough—then, later in adolescence, they will be able to combine masturbation and sexual fantasies with images of love. They will be able to make the switch to real whole-person relationships with young women.

Compulsive Masturbation

Occasionally soothing yourself with masturbation can be a normal part of sexual development. However, when adolescent boys and girls chronically use masturbation to get away from the frustration and emotional pain of living in an abusive, authoritarian family, problems can result. Masturbation to orgasm does provide a physical release, and the behavior is reinforced. This can lead to a lifelong pattern of sexual compulsion. All pain is dealt with through sexual release.

I was so frustrated on that long drive home from work, and so angry that Jane doesn't keep the house clean or make a nice dinner for me, that before I knew what was happening, I found myself in the combat zone, getting a blow job from a hooker.

I honestly don't know how I got there. It's like I was on automatic pilot. But then, you know, I think, "Well, I worked hard all day. I deserved that."

—Sean, 33

Sexual Addiction

When the family environment contains only disappointment and abuse, offset with little love and empathy, sexual trouble looms. People who grow up in families which are abusive start to think that they are basically unworthy people. They also begin to believe that their needs will never be met if they have to depend on others.

As Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., points out (1992), good parenting includes touching, loving, affirming, and guiding. The child in this kind of family feels cared for even when struggling with rules and limits.

But when a child's exploration of sexuality passes self discovery to become a routine way of self-comforting, because the parents aren't emotionally available, there is potential for addiction. Sex is confused with consoling, and to feel secure means to be sexual.

Masturbation may be used as a compulsive, self-soothing mechanism during times of distress, with poor consequences for their sexual and personal development.

"Consequently, the child's relationship with people has the potential of being replaced with an addictive relationship with sexuality. Addiction is a relationship—a pathological relationship in which sexual obsession replaces people. And it can start very early. The . . . core belief of the addict emerges clearly: *Sex is my most important need.*" (pp. 71–72)

Sean's compulsive use of masturbation to soothe his feelings of being abused led to sexual addiction and criminal activities. He came into therapy for help with his rage in his relationship with his wife. Sean was bright, funny, and charming, but he had a darker side in his family.

Sean felt overworked and underappreciated, and he was exhausted by his role as the breadwinner for his wife and two small children. Sean had the capacity to love, but he had a long-smoldering rage and a difficulty with impulse control.

As his trust grew, Sean revealed that he was a sexual addict. Unbeknownst to his wife, he had been seeing prostitutes and exposing himself while masturbating on his ride home. He also had exposed himself to a neighbor twice, and had gotten caught.

Sean grew up in what looked like a nice, middle-class home. However, his father was a tyrant, and his mother did not protect him. His father was verbally and physically abusive, and was hypercritical of everything that Sean did.

Sean became aware of his own sexual impulse quite young, around age seven. He began masturbating, alone in his room, beginning then. As he got older, around age ten, he began to have occasional intercourse with a thirteen-year-old girl who lived nearby.

Sean used sexuality to propel himself out of the pain of his home life. As he got to be an adolescent, Sean's father only increased his dominion over him. One summer, he made Sean hand-dig a huge, deep hole for the foundation of an addition to the house. The more power Sean's father exerted, the more adolescent Sean retreated to his room, to compulsively masturbate while thinking vengeful thoughts. This set the pattern for the way Sean thinks about his sexual desires—as his just reward during tough times.

Besides visiting prostitutes, Sean also exposed himself. Sean's activity exposing himself is a criminal offense, but he never went so far as to physically and aggressively touch or hurt another person. He did have the capacity to connect to his wife and children, and he got real pleasure out of his relationship with them. As his therapy uncovered what had gone wrong in his family, his sexual compulsions improved. If you have a sexual pattern like Sean's, get professional help, because you can change.

Anna grew up in a filthy, chaotic home. Her father went off to work each day, ignoring the fact that his wife was a terrible alcoholic who physically abused and neglected Anna and her sister, Tiesha. Anna's pediatrician never seemed to pick up on the fact that Anna had an unusual number of sprains and twice had a broken arm. There wasn't much relief from the insecurity and the maltreatment.

Anna discovered masturbation when she was about seven, when she found out that if she squeezed her favorite teddy bear between her legs, she got nice feelings. Whenever her mother hurt her or hit her, she began masturbating compulsively, but secretly. It felt good to her to take care of her own needs.

She didn't have many friends, but she began to act out sexual fantasies on Tiesha, who was four years younger. Anna made Tiesha perform sexual acts on her, and swore her to silence. She began a pattern of penetrating Tiesha with her finger, and was obsessed with fantasies involving rape.

After she left her family, Anna felt scared and lonely. She felt ashamed of what she had done with Tiesha and swore that she would never abuse anyone else again.

Anna didn't continue to abuse others, but she continued to abuse herself. She didn't really trust anyone, man or woman alike. She had no idea how to form a friendship or a relationship. She didn't even really like men.

But when she felt empty, she couldn't stand the feelings, and she felt compelled to seek out a sexual partner. She went to bars, and had hundreds of one-night stands with men over the course of three years. It was a temporary sexual fix, and she remained as lonely as ever. It was only when she got very sick, and confronted an AIDS scare, that she stopped and looked at the fact that her life was out of control and that she was a sex addict.

Sexual Predators

At the most extreme, in very violent families, the feelings associated with adult relationships may well elicit too much fear and anger to be associated with sexual arousal, and the child may learn to masturbate and get sexually aroused imagining something safe: an object, other children, sexual deviations such as getting sexual pleasure by watching others. As the child enters puberty, these fantasies persist. Then the fantasies are linked to the pleasure of arousal and this behavior is reinforced by the physical release orgasm brings. The responses become conditioned to various stressful or sexual situations.

In the worst case scenario, masturbation to sadistic scripts in adolescence and adulthood can help create coercive sexual predators and criminals: Boys (and girls) who grew up in violent, controlling environments may learn to tie arousal and orgasm to sadistic, masochistic, or forcible fantasies. Orgasms are a powerful reinforcer of the sadistic fantasies. Eventually these acts may actually be carried out. The recidivism rate among aggressive sex criminals is quite high.

Learning Now What You Didn't Learn Then

Most American adults grew up in reasonably good families and aren't in danger of becoming sexual sadists. Most Americans, men and women

alike, are more likely to have been hampered sexually by a historic lack of permission to explore their bodies, fantasize, and masturbate. If this describes your experience, learning to masturbate and fantasize can be an important step in reaching your sexual potential.

Typically, adults who have been inhibited can overcome their fears about masturbation. They begin to successfully use self-pleasuring to find out what their sexual likes and dislikes are.

Betsy, who at thirty-five lives with her mother for economic reasons, needed to experiment with sexual pleasure and orgasms in order to be more orgasmic with her boyfriend—but she had a lot of obstacles to overcome before she became competent at masturbation.

Her mother actually was very open to all of this, but Betsy somehow felt too shy to ask for privacy. It was a small house, and the laundry room, where her mother not only did washing, but quite a bit of ironing, was down the hall from her room. Even if Betsy took a long time to get into the mood and lie there, her concentration was broken by hearing her mother walk back and forth to the ironing board.

In addition, she had a difficult time stimulating herself with her hand, but felt using a vibrator was too mechanical and she couldn't let herself enjoy it. She was concerned with the noise the vibrator made, and couldn't relax and let herself fantasize because she felt too uptight with her mother in the same house.

After quite a long time brainstorming, Betsy took a huge risk. She asked her mother to give her a few hours in the house alone on Saturdays. Her mother agreed, and Betsy began to experiment with using the vibrator. As she got more comfortable, she learned that it was okay to masturbate with the vibrator when her mother was in the house, as long as she put loud music on the stereo. As she learned what she liked, physically, her sexual relationship with her boyfriend improved.

If you haven't masturbated before now, it takes a while to get used to the feelings, and it takes time to label the feelings you do feel as pleasure. Be patient. Be creative. Several excellent books, listed in the Resources section for this chapter, will help you.

Exercises

Assess Your Feelings About Masturbation

Read the following lists of feelings (positive, neutral, and negative) about masturbation. Circle all that apply to your experiences.

Positive feelings about masturbation:

- I feel fine about it. Masturbation is a natural activity that normal people use throughout life.
- I used it to reduce tension in a healthy way.
- I used it to visualize sexual encounters that I wanted to have with real people. I think it was helpful.
- I think I used it to understand and integrate my own sexuality.

Neutral feelings about masturbation and fantasy:

- I didn't masturbate or fantasize, and I think it was okay.
- I did masturbate or fantasize, and I think it was okay.

Negative feelings about masturbation or fantasy:

- I didn't masturbate or fantasize. In looking back, I feel my family environment was too restrictive.
- I wish I had been able to use masturbation or fantasy in a positive way, but I wasn't able to. I think it might have helped me in these ways:

- I did it, but I felt really guilty about it.
- I used masturbation to avoid interactions with my peers; I think it was used in a bad way, as an escape.
- The fact that I used masturbation as much as I did makes me feel that I am sexually inept.

- I used it to soothe myself in a somewhat compulsive way. (If so, what feelings were you trying to avoid having?)

Identifying Your Central Masturbation Fantasy.

Did you have a central or main masturbation fantasy? What was it? Did it change over time? Do you still use it now?

Are You Sexually Compulsive?

Answer the following questions.

	Yes	No
• There was violence in my family of origin.	_____	_____
• On some level, I don't really trust people.	_____	_____
• I basically assume I have to meet all of my own needs.	_____	_____
• I learned to use sexuality and masturbation to soothe myself when things got too tough to stand in my family.	_____	_____
• I consciously use sexuality when life is hard.	_____	_____
• There are times when I automatically use sexual behaviors when I am upset, rather than using other techniques to calm down.	_____	_____
• I don't feel able to stop masturbating or using other compulsive sexual behavior.	_____	_____
• I sometimes worry that I have used other people sexually in a manipulative way.	_____	_____

If you answered yes to the first question, be sure to read chapter 11 on violence in this book for more exercises.

If you answered yes to more than four of the above questions, the negative power dynamics in your family have *clearly* contributed to your sexual difficulty. Either you are unable to use sexuality in order to express a deep connection to another person, or you are using sexuality (including masturbation and fantasy) in an addictive or abusive fashion.

Are You a Sex Addict?

If you have a problem using sex in an addictive way, make an inventory of the ways you have used sexuality to control or hurt others. Make the list historically, by date, starting at the beginning of the pattern. Use a separate piece of paper or your journal if you need more room for this exercise.

You may be using sexuality for stress-control instead of for connecting to other people. Sexuality can block painful feelings, because an orgasm has a great capacity to reduce tension. Begin keeping a journal of your daily experiences with using sexuality (including masturbation) as a way of soothing yourself. Keep track of when you used a compulsive sexual activity, what feeling you believe you were avoiding, and what other kind of stress-relieving activity you could have used in its place.

Date	Time	Upsetting Event	Type of Compulsive Activity	Avoided Feeling	Alternative Action You Could Have Taken
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____