

The Fourth and Fifth Rs

Respect and Responsibility

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10 Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement

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I lost my virginity when I was 15. My boyfriend and I thought we loved each other. But once we began having sex, it completely destroyed any love we had. I felt he was no longer interested in spending time with me—he was interested in spending time with my body.

—AMANDA, A COLLEGE STUDENT

I wish someone had been preaching abstinence in my ear when I was in high school. That was when my sexual activity started. I don't even want to think about my college years. I wish I had saved this for my wife.

—A 26-YEAR-OLD HUSBAND

In discussions of teen sex, much is said about the dangers of pregnancy and disease but far less about the emotional hazards. That's a problem, because the destructive psychological consequences of temporary sexual relationships are very real. Being aware of them can help a young person make the decision to refrain from premature sexual involvement—both to avoid getting hurt and to avoid hurting someone else.

That's not to say we should downplay the physical consequences of uncommitted sex. Pregnancy is a life-changing event. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)—and there are now more than 20—can rob you of your health and even your life. Condoms do not eliminate these dangers. About 15% of adults who use condoms to prevent pregnancy find themselves pregnant over the course of a year.¹ Despite condom use, there remains a 15% risk of sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS, a 50% risk of Chlamydia² (a cause of female infertility), and a significant risk of human papillomavirus³ (HPV) (cause of cervical cancer). Some STDs can be passed on by skin-to-skin contact in the entire genital area, only part of which is covered by a condom.

Sex and the Human Heart

For human beings, sex is about much more than the body. It's the emotional or psychological dimension of sex that is distinctively human. Our entire person—mind, body, and feelings—is involved. That's why sexual intimacy has potentially powerful emotional consequences.



Dr. Armand Nicholi, Jr., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes a study that shed light on the emotional consequences of sexual behavior:

When Harvard students adopted a strict sexual code, their relationships and academic performance improved.

Not long after the sexual revolution was underway, clinicians—even orthodox Freudians—observed that the new sexual freedom was creating a psychological disaster. We began to study Harvard students who complained of emptiness and despondency. There was a gap between their social conscience and the morality they were practicing in their personal lives. The new sexual permissiveness was leading to empty relationships and feelings of self-contempt. When some of them moved away from moral relativism to a system of clear values—typically embracing a drug-free lifestyle and a strict sexual code—their relationships with the opposite sex improved, as did relations with peers in general, relationships with parents, and their academic performance.⁴

Ten Emotional Dangers

Let's look at ten emotional dangers of premature sex.

1. Worry about pregnancy and disease. For many young people who have become sexually active, the fear of pregnancy or getting a sexually transmitted disease causes major emotional stress. One high school girl told a counselor:

I see some of my friends buying home pregnancy tests. They are so worried and so distracted every month, afraid that they might be pregnant. It's a relief to me to be a virgin.

There is no condom for the heart.

2. Regret. A 2004 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy asked teens, "If you have had sexual intercourse, do you wish you had waited?" Two-thirds of all teens said yes. Girls are more vulnerable to feelings of regret. A girl who sees sex as a way to "show you care" may feel cheated and used when the boy doesn't show a greater romantic interest after the sexual experience. Said one 15-year-old girl: "I didn't expect the guy to marry me, but I never expected him to avoid me in school."

"New rules" about sex haven't changed the greater vulnerability experienced by girls. Hooking up—"messing around" sexually with someone you may not even know or care about—is increasingly common on college campuses and even in some high schools. But after the sexual encounter, girls often still end up hoping that the guy will call.

Some young persons regret becoming sexually involved because they feel trapped in the relationship. Karen, age 16, had that experience.

Since that first night, my boyfriend expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in a big argument. I'd like to end this relationship and date others, but after being so intimate, it's awfully tough.

Sexual regrets can last for many years. I received a letter from a 33-year-old woman, now a psychiatrist, who wanted to share the lessons about sex that she learned the hard way. After high school, she says, she spent a year abroad as an 18-year-old exchange student:

I was a virgin when I left, but during that year abroad, I was very promiscuous. The longest-standing wound I gave myself was heartfelt. That sick, used feeling of having given a precious part of myself—my soul—to so many and for nothing, still aches. I never imagined I'd pay so dearly or for so long.

Guys who get sexually and emotionally involved with a girl can also suffer regrets. Here's one guy's story:

A year ago I started dating a girl two years younger. We fell head over heels in love. When I'd go to her house, her parents would go to bed early. We started necking a little, then all the time. I started getting a little fresh, and she resisted, but she finally gave in for fear of losing me.

Then one night we had a terrible argument. She hit me, and I hit her back. I have never forgiven myself for that. She told her mother EVERYTHING that happened between us. You can imagine what happened after that.

I was going to college at the time. I couldn't keep my mind on my studies, so I quit college and joined the Navy. I saw her on the street before I left for basic training. She cried and told me she still felt the same about me, but it was too late.

I'd give anything in the world if she had stuck to her guns and I hadn't been so persistent. Any girl who thinks she has to put out to keep a guy is crazy. I would have stayed with her if she had only let me hold her hand.

—A SORRY SAILOR

3. Guilt. Guilt is a special form of regret—a strong sense of having done something morally wrong. Guilt is healthy if you take it as a sign that your conscience is alive and working—

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE DELAY OF SEX

FAMILY FACTORS

1. High parent-teen connectedness
2. Parent disapproval of teen's being sexually active
3. Parent disapproval of teen's using contraception

SCHOOL FACTORS

1. High level of school connectedness
2. Enrollment at a school with a high daily attendance rate

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

1. Personal commitment to abstinence until marriage
2. Importance ascribed to religion/prayer
3. High grade-point average

—NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH (1997)

and as a reason to avoid in the future the behavior that caused you to have a guilty conscience.

In his book for teens, *Love, Dating, and Sex*, George Eager offers this advice to young men: “When the breakup comes, it’s usually a lot tougher on the girls than it is on the guys. It’s not something you want on your conscience—that you caused a girl to have deep emotional problems.”

Guilt after sex may also stem from one’s religious convictions. The major world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all teach that sex is a beautiful gift from a good God but one reserved for the committed love relationship of marriage. A *Newsweek* cover article on the “new virginity” (a majority of high school students now say they have *not* had sexual intercourse) included a story about Lucian Shulte, a Roman Catholic. He said his parents taught him the importance of chastity, and he had always planned to “wait until marriage.” But one warm summer night, he found himself with a girl who was very willing—and they had intercourse. It was over in a hurry and lacked any sense of intimacy. He said:

In the movies, when people have sex, it’s always romantic. Physically, it felt good, but emotionally it felt really awkward. I was worried that our relationship was now going to be a lot more serious than it was before. It was like, “Now what is she going to expect from me?”

Lucian felt guilty about what he had done. He promised himself, never again. As a college student, he’s still faithful to that decision. He says, “I’m looking forward to intimacy with my wife, someone I’ll truly love and want to spend the rest of my life with. It sounds corny, but it’s for real.”

Abortion. Many young people turn to abortion when they find themselves facing a pregnancy. As both sides of the abortion debate now acknowledge, abortion ends a developing human life (there’s a beating heart at 18 days, measurable brain waves at 6 weeks). Many women report distressing emotional consequences after abortion—depression, nightmares, loss of self-worth, and guilt—sometimes right away, sometimes not until years later. Here is the testimony of a 30-year-old mother concerning the abortion she had in college:

It was my sophomore year. I came back from winter break sick as a dog. The doctor in the campus infirmary took a urine test and told me in a non-judgmental way that I was pregnant. “What would you like to do?” he asked.

“I want to get rid of it,” I said, without even blinking an eye.

He wrote down the phone number and address of a nearby women’s health clinic. The “procedure” was surprisingly simple. There was strong cramping, but I could handle that. If someone had asked me right then how I felt about what I had just done, I would have said, “Wow, this is great! I have my health back. I have my life back!”

Go ahead, ask me now. I am, at this moment, crying.

How callous I was. Just a kid, really. Self-centered and shallow. There are so many other alternatives. I am humbled by my two amazing living children. Most of all, I am humbled by my friend, Amy. She felt so strongly for her miscarried unborn child that she gave the child a name and a funeral. I didn’t give mine a second thought—until I grew up.

Guys, too, can suffer from the emotional aftershocks of abortion. I once listened to a college freshman speaking to an audience of peers about the turmoil he felt—including difficulty sleeping and studying—after he helped his girlfriend get an

abortion. National networks (e.g., www.afterabortion.com) have formed to help both men and women deal with the emotional aftereffects of abortion.

4. Loss of self-esteem and self-respect. Many persons suffer a loss of self-esteem after they find out they have a sexually transmitted disease. Larry had not heard of HPV before he had sex with his girlfriend. Soon after, he noticed some small bumps on his penis. His physician told him he had genital warts caused by HPV. The warts did not respond well to acid treatment, laser techniques, or surgery. After unsuccessful treatments, Larry began to worry if he would ever be able to marry because of the warts.

Sometimes the loss of self-esteem after uncommitted sex leads a person into further casual sex, leading to further loss of self-esteem in an oppressive cycle from which it may be

Sex is so special, it deserves a special home. It’s most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it’s part of something bigger—a continuing loving relationship between two human beings. When you’re married, your sexual intimacy expresses your total commitment to each other. You are saying with your body, “I give myself to you, completely.” From this perspective, you join your bodies when you join your lives. The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.

—Character Matters

hard to break free. This pattern is described by a young woman who is a residence hall director at our college:

There are girls in our dorm who have had multiple pregnancies and multiple abortions. The ironic thing is that practically all the girls who talk to me say they *hate* the whole scene—the bars, the parties, the attitudes and sexual expectations of guys. But because they have such low self-esteem, they will settle for any kind of attention from guys.

Oral sex and self-respect. An April 2000 *New York Times* article, “The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger,” told the stories of young girls who were emotionally distraught because of their involvement in oral sex. Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil have each devoted an entire show to the issue of oral sex. On Dr. Phil’s program, a 13-year-old girl looked into the camera, tears streaming down her face, and said to young people who might be watching:

Don’t do this . . . please don’t do this. You will lose all your self-respect. Things will get worse for you, much worse.

Kids need clear messages about the physical and emotional dangers of this form of sexual activity (see box).

5. The corruption of character. When we treat others as sexual objects to be used for our selfish pleasure, we not only lose self-respect, we change our character—the kind of person we are becoming. One young man spoke of how his sexual activity, like an addiction, undermined his self-control:

It was like a drug. The more sex I had, the more I wanted. I couldn’t control myself, yet I wasn’t satisfied at all.

Pornography is an increasingly common sexual addiction. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Sean Covey describes pornography’s corrosive effects on conscience and character:

Like any other addiction, pornography sneaks up on you. It reminds me of a story I once read about frogs. If you put a frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out. But if you put it in lukewarm water, the frog will get cooked before it has the sense to jump out. It’s the same with pornography. Because the heat was ever so slowly turned up, you didn’t even notice that your conscience was being fried.

6. Fear of commitment. Young people who feel betrayed after the breakup of a sexual relationship may experience difficulty trusting in future relationships. They don’t want to be burned again. Brian, a college senior, tells his story:

I first had intercourse with my girlfriend when we were 15. I’d been going with her for almost a year, and I loved her very much. She was friendly, outgoing, and charismatic. We’d done everything but have intercourse, and then one night she asked if we could go all the way.

A few days later, we broke up. It was the most painful time of my life. I had opened up to her more than anybody, even my parents. I was depressed and nervous. I dropped out of sports and felt like a failure. In college, I’ve had mostly one-night stands. I’m afraid of falling in love.

7. Depression and suicide. Research finds that teens who abstain from risky behavior—such as sex, drugs, and drinking—are the least likely to experience depression. Both males and females who engage in high levels of risky behavior are the *most* likely to get depressed.⁵ A 1991 study in *Pediatrics* found that the attempted suicide rate for sexually experienced girls between the ages of 12 and 16 was six times higher than it was for girls that age who were virgins.

"Friends with benefits" is a current sexual pattern that can carry a high emotional cost, especially for women. In her 2006 book, *Unprotected*, a college psychiatrist describes college women she sees in counseling who say that they have a male "friend with benefits" and who feel confused and de-

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT ORAL SEX

- 1. No boy who truly respects or cares about a girl would ask her to do this.**
- 2. Some girls make the mistake of initiating oral sex because they think they can give a guy what he wants while avoiding pregnancy, but then discover that oral sex actually reduces intimacy.**
- 3. Many sexually transmitted diseases—including herpes, chlamydia, and human papilloma virus—can be transmitted through oral sex.**
- 4. If you’re a girl and you engage in oral sex, you risk experiencing the same feelings of being used that frequently follow uncommitted intercourse.**
- 5. If you’re a boy and getting girls to do this, you’re disrespecting the girl (would you want somebody doing this to your sister?) and your future spouse.**

You are going too far when . . .

- ◆ **Either person's hands start roaming.**
- ◆ **You start to remove clothing.**
- ◆ **You are doing something you wouldn't do in the presence of someone you really respect.**
- ◆ **You are arousing feelings that reduce your self-control and ability to make the right decision.**

—George Eager, *Love, Dating, and Sex*

pressed about the relationship. Says Heather:

I want to spend more time with him, do stuff like go shopping or see a movie. That would make it a friendship for me. But he says no, then we'd have a relationship, and that's more than he wants. It seems like I don't get the "friend" part, but he still gets the "benefits." It's hard for me to be with him and then go home alone.

8. Damaged or ruined relationships. Sex can turn a good relationship bad. Other dimensions of the relationship soon stop developing. Negative emotions enter the picture. Eventually, they poison the relationship. Jennifer, age 24, shares her story:

Sex became the center of our relationship. Like a cancer, it took over. New things entered—anger, impatience, jealousy, and selfishness. We just couldn't talk anymore. We grew very bored with each other.

9. Stunted Personal Development. Premature sexual involvement not only can stunt the development of a relationship, it can also stunt one's development as a person. The risk appears to be greater for girls who get sexually involved and thereby close the door on other interests and relationships. Says psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Kauffman:

A girl who enters into a serious relationship with a boy very early in life may find out later that her individuality was thwarted. She became part of him and failed to develop her own interests, her sense of independent identity.

10. Negative effects on marriage. Most teens say they dream of being happily married someday. They should ask themselves, "What sexual decisions at this point in my life will help me realize my dream of a happy marriage? What problems might I cause for myself or future spouse by being sexually intimate before marriage?" Here are four:

Comparisons and flashbacks. If you have had sex with someone other than your marriage partner, there may be a tendency, sometimes beyond your control, to compare your spouse with previous partners. Says one young husband: "When I make love with my wife, I think, 'My old girlfriend could kiss better,' or 'This girl could do that better.' I can't get rid of the comparisons." Both men and women may also experience "sexual flashbacks"—mental images of previous partners—that can disrupt marital sexual intimacy.

Infidelity. Experts believe that infidelity on the part of both sexes has risen in recent decades. The ability to resist temptation is part of our character—something that is developed over time, through practice. If we haven't practiced saying "no" to sexual temptations before marriage, it may be harder to resist such temptations after marriage.

Infertility. Infertility can cause tremendous stress on a marriage. If it was caused by a sexually transmitted disease such as chlamydia, the stress is even greater. A 33-year-old wife writes:

Sometime during my wild college days, I picked up an infection that damaged the inside of my fallopian tubes and left me infertile. I am now married to a wonderful man who very much wants children, and the guilt I feel is overwhelming.

A greater chance of divorce. Living together before marriage is associated with a greater risk of divorce. The more live-in partners you have before marriage, the greater

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- ◆ ***Just for Girls/Just 4 Guys***
<http://www.humanlife.org/j4g.php>
- ◆ **Deborah Cole & Maureen Duran, *Sex and Character* (1998).** (www.amazon.com)
- ◆ **Sean Covey, *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make* (2006).** (www.amazon.com)
- ◆ **Wendy Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good* (2007).** (www.amazon.com)
- ◆ ***Smart & Good High Schools* (pp. 166-173).** www.cortland.edu/character
- ◆ **www.everybodysnotdoingit.com**
- ◆ **www.cortland.edu/character/sex_character/articles_sc.html**

your chance of marital breakdown. John and Kathy Colligan, who have spent many years counseling couples preparing for marriage, share their experience:

We see many engaged couples who are living together. They haven't discussed their values and goals. When we suggest that they not live or sleep together, that they try to become friends and get to know each other to find out if they're really compatible, they often resist. We can see that this is a marriage likely to fail—and time after time, it does.

The Rewards of Waiting

Saving sexual intimacy and resisting sexual pressures carry many rewards (see box). One is self-respect. A 16-year-old girl shares her story:

I was very naive about sex. I had the usual crushes on boys who didn't notice me. My 9th-grade year, though, I found out what it's like to stand up for your morals. The first kiss was not all that enjoyable and the hands up the shirt shocked me. The next time we were alone, the boy tried to go all the way. I said no and explained my position. He took me home in complete silence. I was hurt when he no longer wanted to see me, but I was confident I had done the right thing.

Don't Think, "It's Too Late for Me"

Many teens who have already been sexually involved make the mistake of thinking, "It's too late for me to change." Teens need real-life stories of young people who were sexually involved once but have made a fresh start. Here is Becky:

I've had sex with a lot of guys, but I was always drunk so I didn't think it mattered. Now I realize that I gave each of those guys a part of myself. I don't want all that pain anymore. I'm going to make a new beginning and not have sex again until I'm married.

TEN REWARDS OF WAITING

1. Waiting will make your relationships better because you'll spend more time getting to know each other.
2. Waiting will increase your self-respect.
3. Waiting will gain you respect for having the courage of your convictions.
4. Waiting will teach you to respect others—you won't tempt or pressure them.
5. Waiting takes the pressure off you.
6. Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no regrets).
7. Waiting will help you find the right mate—someone who values you for the person you are.
8. Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage—free of comparisons and based on trust. By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.
9. By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as good judgment, self-control, modesty, and genuine respect for self and others—you're developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner.
10. By becoming a person of character yourself, you'll be able to attract a person of character—the kind of person you'd like to marry and to have as the father or mother of your children.

Stories like this teach a vital lesson: *You can't change the past, but you can choose the future.*

Sex can be the source of great pleasure and joy. But it can also be the source of deep wounds and suffering. What makes the difference is the relationship within which it occurs.

Sexual intimacy is most joyful, meaningful, and fulfilling—most emotionally safe as well as physically safe—when it occurs within a loving, total, and binding commitment. Historically, we have called that marriage. Sexual union is then part of something bigger—the faithful union of two people's lives. ■

Notes

¹ R. A. Hatcher, J. Trussell, F. H. Stewart, et al. *Contraceptive technology*. 18th Revised ed. (New York: Ardent Media, Inc., 2005).

² S. Ahmed, T. Lutalo, M. Wawer, et al., "HIV incidence and sexually transmitted disease prevalence associated with condom use: A population study in Rakai, Uganda," *AIDS*, 15 (16) 2001, 2171-2179.

³ R. L. Winer, J. P. Hughes, Q. Feng, et al., "Condom use and the risk of genital human papillomavirus infection in young women," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 354, 2006, 2645-2654.

⁴ A. Nicholi, "A new dimension of the youth culture," *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 131, 396-401.

⁵ M.W. Waller, et al., "Gender differences in association between depressive symptoms and patterns of substance abuse and risky sexual behavior," *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 9, 139-150, 2006.

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