



Our Voices

podcast

by  OurPath

S3 Ep 20

Let's Talk About Sex. No, Let's Really Talk About It.

Kristin Kalbli: Hello everyone and welcome to the Straight Spouse Network podcast, Straight Spouse Voices. I'm your host, Kristin Kalbli. Our guest today is Deborah Simmons. Debra is the co-author of a yet to be published book, "What's a Good Man to Do? A Candid Conversation About Sexuality." In the book, Debra draws upon conversations about sexuality with men and women from all walks of life, as well as her experiences, dealing with sexuality in the workplace. Debra began working in sexuality as a student at Stanford, where she served as a research assistant to nationally known social scientist and sexuality researcher, Professor Robert Michael, who organized one of the most important surveys of sexual behavior ever undertaken in the US. They spent long hours discussing sexuality in order to interpret and understand the data. Those candid conversations resulted in a lifelong friendship and their recent book collaboration. Welcome to the podcast Deborah, it's a pleasure to have you.

Deborah Simmons: Thank you so much for having me. I look forward to talking with you today.

Kristin Kalbli: So one of the reasons I wanted to have you on - first off, this is the final podcast of our third season, and we like to end the season on a positive, upbeat note. We've had lots of stories throughout the year, oftentimes that are difficult and before the holidays I want to leave our listeners with a bit of a gift. And this gift is going to be talking about conversations around sex and sexuality as our Straight Partners who perhaps are out there in the dating world trying to establish relationships for the first time, in a long time and they are - this is the #me too era, it's a new day, maybe since they dated before and so the landscape has changed. And so we're going to be talking about frank conversations around sex and sexuality and how to have them with new partners, new potential relationships going forward. Because the reason Straight Partners are often in the situation that we're in is because frank conversations about sex and sexuality didn't happen in our marriages so we want to carry a new honesty into our future relationships. So Debra, can you give us a little bit of backdrop? Set the scene for us around what's going on in the culture around talking about our sexuality with our partners.

Deborah Simmons: Yes. I'd like to do that and I'd like to set the stage for how it is we end up in these relationships in which not only do we have difficulty talking about sexuality with our intimate partners, but as we go out in the dating world and we're seeking new intimate partners. I'd like to say you're not completely to blame for this difficult situation in which you ended up. Your old relationship and your new ones, they're taking place in the context of what I would call willful ignorance about sex and such sexuality. For the last hundred years, the US government has actively forbidden and refused to fund any research on sex and sexuality and has actively interfered with that. And if you think of us as a polarized nation politically, we're not polarized about this, whatever your political persuasion, whatever your religious orientation, we are united in willful ignorance about sex.

Kristin Kalbli: I had no idea. I had no idea that the government and this is not for anybody cringing, this is not a political podcast. We're not going kind of going down that kind of that particular rabbit hole but the basic fact that the US government has never funded any research on sex and sexuality seems a gross oversight to me since sex and sexuality is so fundamental to healthy, happy lives. So that's just a shocking statistic to me.

Deborah Simmons: It's unbelievable and then in the 1990s for the first time ever, my coauthor, Robert Michael, led a nationwide study of sexuality of Americans and it was the first time ever. Before up until that time, there's a big book called the Statistical Abstract of the United States, with all the data that we learned in all the federally funded studies and the index of that literally went from sewage to sheep. That is the topic. It was alphabetical. There was no topic called sex. There is now a topic called sex, but still it's a woefully underfunded study. So we don't know as Americans what is going on in the broader world of sex and sexuality, because on purpose, we're not funding that and one of the things we learned when we studied sexuality is how incredibly varied this is

Deborah Simmons: and I've learned this in talking with people about sexuality and we also know it from the data. That if you take two people and you sit them down, you're the straight spouse going back out in the world for your dating life and we put someone at random and put them opposite across you at the picnic table or something, you know and you think of all the possible ranges of sexual behavior, chances are pretty good there's something this person likes or doesn't like that you haven't thought of. That's how different we are in our perception of sex and sexuality .

Kristin Kalbli: I want to - that makes a lot of sense to me that there are as many sexualities, if you will, as there are people on the planet. And on one level, like that we're all so different from each other that we have some commonalities and overlap and categories that we can kind of put ourselves into but at the end of the day, everybody is into something slightly, a little bit different. And I want to circle back to what you were saying before about that this is not the fact that the Straight Partner has found themselves in a relationship where conversations about sex and sexuality are not on the table, or disclosure has not happened. This is not your fault because it's part of a backdrop of a sort of a gag order essentially if you will, in the entire country at a political social collective level that talking about researching sex and sexuality is for some reason, taboo. That's huge, I think to me.

Deborah Simmons: It is. It's not that you could've done something better or different or that everybody else got it right and you got it wrong. That yes, we as a culture are just so uncomfortable and I noticed in several of the other podcasts, you talk about - several of the other guests have talked about how our narrow views of sex and sexuality kind of push people who are gay or trans or queer questioning into straight marriages as a cloak. There's some understanding of how that happens and some hope that as we're more open about sexuality, that that will happen less. I think one of your guests said it so well. He said, "We were not the first generation of gay people to cloak ourselves in straight marriage, but let us be the last."

Kristin Kalbli: Yes, yes. William Dahmer and the author of "The Lie", that was one of his quotes and we certainly feel that more open dialogue around sex and sexuality will lead to fewer closets and that is, I think everybody's goal hopefully. So we've got this backdrop of a culture of silence around sex and sexuality, and it brings me to something that you had said which I found really powerful. And when we, you and I talked before this podcast, and you had said, "Because there's so much shame around sex and sexuality, we've not been truthful with one another." And that really is the heart of the issue for I think Straight Partners, is that we've been in relationships where being truthful about who we are sexually and truthful about who we are sexuality wise, hasn't been able to be on the - of our sexualities haven't been able to be on the table, at least for our LGBTQ+ partners and so that's the crux of the problem because there's so much shame around sex and sexuality. So where do we go from here in this backdrop?

Deborah Simmons: So, it's true. It's not just that the shame around sex and sexuality as closeted our partners, but our sexuality to have straight people is also closeted. And it's not just closeted with our partners that we're have difficulty speaking candidly about sex and sexuality. It's sometimes it's closeted with ourselves. We don't know whether the things that we like or find appealing are normal. There's just no basis for understanding that and in fact something that might disgust one person might delight someone else. And so it's really hard to be comfortable with our own selves and then to open our heart and share with someone else in the context of dating and getting to know someone who we are and what we like. It's a very tentative dance because we don't know how we fit in.

Kristin Kalbli: Yeah. Right. Thank you for saying that. I think one of the common themes we hear for Straight Partners who are out in the world dating again is that after they have, if they have divorced - now I want to be clear many Straight Partners and their LGBTQ+ partners stay in mixed orientation marriages, not everyone divorces. And even within those mixed orientation marriages varying degrees of open marriage may be tried in order to meet the needs of everybody in that partnership. And so the kind of bottom line is everybody is exploring a new sexuality, post discovery or post disclosure and so there is a certain sense for many Straight Partners as they go out in the world a gain, this may be the first time they've dated in a decade or more and "What do I like? What am I interested in?" There's a whole new discovery. Maybe I've changed what turns me on or what I find desirable and so there's a whole new phase of discovery that has to kind of be walked through and then maybe you uncover some things about yourself or no, I did. That was like, "oh, okay, I like that, I didn't know I liked that before." So it's a - and then you go, "Oh gosh, do I tell this new partner that I like this thing? What's he going to say? What's he going to do?" All of that, yeah.

Deborah Simmons: Yes, all of that. And you know - so one of the things I would say that Straight Spouses who are venturing back out into the dating world can do to help prepare themselves is to do a bit of a retrospective on the marriage. And I say this because, you know, if you live a hundred years and you marry a lot, suppose you married five times, that's a lot of marriages. That's not very much information. You don't have very much data and so the more you can arm yourself with information and insight and knowledge from the marriage you had, the better off you are. And so, because it's one of the areas where you have good information. And so I think there can be a risk in being the Straight Spouse, especially if you were deceived, it wasn't that your partner changed over time.

Deborah Simmons: It was that your partner actively deceived you and you were just, I think you, I've heard you use the term cover wife, cover life. And it was that from the beginning and you were to see, it's very difficult to avoid the trap of getting locked into what I'll call, self righteous indignation, in which the other person is all wronged and you are sort of justifiably vindicated. There's an element of that, of course. It's dreadful to be deceived, but there's some power in uncovering something you could do differently because it gives you something you could change. You cannot totally defend yourself against being deceived. And one of your guests had a great, great quote that he said, he had, it was your guest who had married two women, two women who were lesbians. (Kristin: Dan Carlin) And what he said, "Was in that second marriage, he realized there was something he could do." He was sleeping in the bedroom with her and he just took that back. He thought, that's under my control. That's something I can do differently. I'm not just being dragged along by this person. I can move out. And so there's an empowerment to saying I'm responsible for some little piece of it, and I'm going to do something different.

Kristin Kalbli: I do love that you say that because in our last episode, the November 1st episode, we interviewed Ross Rosenberg and he talks about the self-love deficit that has us sometimes being drawn like a magnet towards someone who would - and we are talking to here again about the kinds of relationships where someone is using someone as a cover, not the kind of relationships where someone is genuinely questioning their sexuality, and they have good intentions and care for their spouse. We're talking about the more abusive style of relationship here, closeted relationship, but he talks about the self-love deficit that basically draws us like a magnet towards someone like this and that we - there is hope for healing when we take the initiative to be able to say, "Okay, let me, heal this part of myself and I have control, and that's empowering and it's not about fault or blame or that I'm to blame for getting myself into this marriage, but that I was playing a role. Let me not play that role anymore." So when we, I think what you're getting at is like, as we're going out into the world dating again, you say to do a retrospective on the marriage, kinda of look at what patterns existed there and then see where we do have control because that is power empowering or at least have responsibility because responsibility is empowering. We are empowered to make change going forward.

Deborah Simmons: Yeah, exactly and I think, you know, the thing is responsibility is a bitter pill. It's easier to have someone else be fully responsible but as soon as you take the responsibility pill, you're empowered. You're empowered to do something different and make change

Kristin Kalbli: Well, we're going to take a quick break and then we're going to come back with more Deborah Simmons and when we come back, we're going to talk about that sort of retro, doing a retrospective on the marriage. So we'll be right back with more Deborah Simmons. Hey everyone, do you remember the moment when you first discovered your partner wasn't straight? What was that moment like for you? Were you confused, scared, sad, shocked? Did you reach out for help? Are you far enough along on your path that you can reach back and help someone else? The Straights Spouse Network is looking for volunteer triaged team members to join our expanding triage team and new support contacts. Triage is the first point of contact for Straight Partners and Non-trans Partners who come to the SSN every year looking for support. Triage members act as the liaison between the Straight Partner and the SSN support contacts.

Kristin Kalbli: They vet incoming support requests and refer them to the volunteer best suited to fit their needs. Support contacts reach out to the straight or non-trans partner, offering support and an experienced ear. They provide critical support in difficult moments and connect Straight Partners with other resources. The ideal candidates for the triage team and support contacts would be able to be a source of calm and compassion while hearing the stories of Straight Partners in crisis. If you're looking for a meaningful way to give back and to make a difference in the lives of Straight and Non Trans Partners, please go to StraightSpouse.org and click on, Join the Team, at the top of the homepage to learn more or apply. And we're back with Deborah Simmons. So Debra, where we're talking about doing a retrospective on the marriage to kind of do a bit of an autopsy, right. And with the information that you find there, you can hopefully have some hope to be able to say, "Okay, these are the pieces of it that I can maybe do something about going forward into my new dating life." Is that right?

Deborah Simmons: Exactly, exactly and I'd like to tell a story of a woman, someone I talked with who was a Straight Spouse and where she was in the situation and then I'll tell another story of someone different and it'll give you just a sense of the range of differences in the way we can handle our situation. And the first woman, was a woman named Karen and she was in her mid- sixties and she was the Straight Spouse and her husband of 25+ years had left her five to 10 years prior so there've been quite a lot of times, and he'd come out as gay. He had sensory partnered with a man and they had divorced. They had two adult children and when I talked with Karen, she was locked in pain. She had not - she was completely closeted.

Deborah Simmons: She had not told her friends. She had not told her family. She had not told her children what had happened in the marriage and her husband hadn't told anyone and so the whole family was locked in this really painful silence. And she found it incredibly difficult to move forward to think about repartnering because she was locked in such pain. " How will I keep this from happening again?" and she even said, "I'm from the Midwest. I didn't know t hese sorts of things could even happen." She viewed herself as this regular woman who just been, just smacked over the head with something she never saw coming. And I just say that, I would like to say to your Straight Spouses who feel locked in pain in this way, that it's very hard to move forward. " How will I go out in the world and date? It's so scary and so unsafe," that you have some choices. There are different ways of handling your situation to move past, to unlock yourself from the family gridlock of pain. And one of them is something we've talked about a little earlier in the hour of just when you do that retrospective on the marriage, find some things that you can do. There's a lot that Karen could have done here. She could have talked to her children but she was, you know when I talked to her, she was locked in this mindset of, "I can't because there was nothing she could do."

Kristin Kalbli: Right, right. I totally understand the feeling because sometimes it's a trauma response. I think when you feel like you can't trust other people to tell the truth of who they are to you and you can't trust yourself to discern whether or not someone is telling you the truth about who they are either. And so there's a long period of time of rebuilding your sense of, I can trust myself to discern. If someone is being untruthful with me, I can learn the signs that my body is giving me when I'm in the presence of someone without integrity or someone who might be trying to manipulate me. That was a process I had to teach myself. It was a long, long road before I was willing to be open, to be in a relationship again. But I - in order to do that, I just using myself as an example, in order to do that, I had to absolutely take on that process.

Deborah Simmons: Absolutely and the thing is, I would like to say this by way of encouragement to the Straight Spouses who are looking at going out on the dating world, you can learn to do this. It's not that you can be a mind reader and it's not that you can become a person who will never be deceived. You can be a person who is in touch with your intuitive sense of whether or not you're in the presence of someone who is treating you with integrity . And I want to talk about another case of a person, and this is Tanya and she's of a similar age, but she's farther along in the process of healing than Karen was. So she has adult children. Her partner came out to her as gay. He, you know, he deceived her for some period of time, but some point he came out and said, " I want you to know I've been experimenting.

Deborah Simmons: I think that I am gay. I didn't deceive you from the beginning but I now know I've just been deceiving you for a while I've been exploring." And because he had been more forthright, there was much more of a place of healing for them. Where they ended up on their journey when I spoke with her, and she was around 60, she may have been a little early, a little younger, they had decided to stay married, to stay legally married, but to an partner. And he needed health benefits and she had them and there was enough kindness and consideration and love and trust that they stayed legally married. They lived in the same house together and he re partnered and so he had a man that became his long-term partner and she was exploring going out in the dating world. And there was an enormous amount of shame she had to overcome like, "Here I am, I'm going on this first date and how am I going to tell people that I am well, I'm married, but he's gay and we live in the same house." You know, she had to get over the feeling of being weird. I think that's a thing that's Straight Spouses who enter their marriage feeling like I'm a pretty normal person, they've ended up having this very weird part of their life that it can be shameful to talk about.

Kristin Kalbli: Very much so . I want to comment on a couple of things. First off, you know, I can hear my Straights - but I just have to say this because I can hear listeners, their heads exploding. The experience of a partner exploring it is for infidelity and for many Straight Partners they do experience it as intimacy betrayal and infidelity and so the - I want to acknowledge that one partner is exploring their sexuality is another partners infidelity betrayal and so I can be anyway, not always, but can be. And so that's - I just want to acknowledge that for people who are listening - but the other thing is that you are so, I think, right on the money when you talk about the fact that because the second couple that you are sharing about had enough respect and trust between them and that the deception didn't go all the way, but it wasn't entire life of deception that there was goodwill. That the gay partner came out and disclosed, because that goes a long way, to disclosure, rather than discovery, it goes a long way towards healing that enables then a more, I think, robust healing.

Kristin Kalbli: And, but, you know, Straight Partners don't always have control over whether or not they are disclosed to, or whether or not they discover and we find that that is an instrumental piece and how well or smoothly the healing goes.

Deborah Simmons: Yeah. That's such a good point. And I want to echo what you said about if you're in a relationship and you're expecting fidelity and the person is experimenting with other people that you're feeling of injustice and betrayal is totally warranted. I agree with you fully and I - but I think there's some learning here from this matter of discovery versus disclosure. If you're a Straight Spouse and you discovered instead of being disclosed, to carry that knowledge into your dating life and disclose. Imagine if you're dating someone and they discover that you're still married to your former partner, or that you had this unusual experience in your first marriage, imagine if they discover and you didn't disclose. So taking that wounding from discovery instead of disclosure, and learn to be a discloser. (Kristin: oh, I like that.) Those are of all things that - and the journey that you have been on of your own sexuality and your own relationships, you can disclose. And it's a thing you can carry as a beacon into your dating life, which is I'm going to disclose.

Kristin Kalbli: Really, personally I like that so much because it takes the power of the narrative back rather than I'm a victim of this narrative. I actually discovered this thing about my life, it was a difficult discovery, it was maybe even a traumatic discovery but I discovered it and this is my lived experience. And I think that the more we tell our stories - the tagline of this podcast is keep using your voice for a reason, because the more we tell our stories openly, the more we actually are empowered around the narrative of our story and it becomes, we get better. I think for people who are dating for the first time, again post-divorce, or in the midst of mixed orientation marriage; "How do I explain my living situation? My gay husband is living in the house with me in the basement and we co-parent," and all this kind of stuff is like to begin to tell that, put it out there, like own it. rock it. I mean, it's really, really hard but I get that it takes practice, it takes time. The first time you roll that story out, it's probably going to be really clunky and your date might leave early and that's okay, that's okay. They were meant for you anyway. You shouldn't be dating that person anyway.

Deborah Simmons: I agree. Absolutely. It's just taking the ideas, taking back the narrative. And it's also, I think when we're deeply wounded as Straight Spouses are, when you're deeply wounded, one of the steps on the path toward healing is finding meaning in that awful thing, that awful experiencing and converting it into something that has meaning for you. And so if that awful thing, if one of the things that you learn is the horrible trauma that comes out of being closeted, then that can be something that you carry along to say, "I'm going to be a discloser" And yes, you're so right. It - you may chase people off right there. Well, that's who you want to go.

Kristin Kalbli: Bye boy, bye girl. Bye. (laughter)

Deborah Simmons: Exactly goodbye. Here's my story and if that's not a story you can manage, I want to understand that on the first date.

Kristin Kalbli: Right and you save a lot of time too. I mean, if they're going to bolt at that then okay, next.

Deborah Simmons: Right and the other thing we can do as Straight Spouses are heading out into the dating world, is to invite disclosure. And so if you had a marriage in which you didn't talk about sex and intimacy, and there were big secrets, learning about sort of shame and secrecy, which are lessons that Straight Spouses have learned in this space, dating is an opportunity to work on this matter of shame and secrecy. And rather than carry out a checklist, that's like, "I need to make sure this person is straight, it's like, okay."

Kristin Kalbli: And again, that's the list of questions in the Straight Spouse's head as there dating is like looking on high alert for any indication whatsoever that this person might give off any sort of hint of - I mean, I know women and men too, who have come out of this experiencing, like, I could only date really, really macho kind of guys who wore you know, but that's not foolproof either. Or so you are - it's a trauma response. So I want to be really clear about that. Like, if you burn your hand on the stove, you don't go near the stove for a while. So yeah. But I mean, you hit on it really, really well is that there's this checklist of like, "Okay, you know, all of the things that might potentially be a red flag that this person might be hiding their sexuality from me is like front and center."

Deborah Simmons: Indeed and imagine though if you think about going out into the world where there's only one box on your checklist and it's like, "Are you straight?" You know, that doesn't sound like a recipe for success, need to question ourselves. It's like, "Okay, really what's my list?" And imagine you were counseling someone who has maybe an adult child and they were to tell you the only thing their list is the person is straight, how alarm bells would go off for you. And so the thing that I think can be really helpful is; "Can you have a conversation with a person about shame and secrecy and disclose? How do they handle your disclosures? And how about what kind of reciprocal disclosures do they make to you?" You brought your story, and you just brought your real self and your real story and your hopes and your dreams and the thing and your disappointments. And what did this person bring to you on this date? Was it real? Was everything polished and shiny? What do you think underneath the polished and shiny?

Kristin Kalbli: Yeah. I mean, so it requires a lot of vulnerability to bring you really you on a date and talk about shame and secrecy. Like these are my shames and secrets or the things that I'm worried about someone else will keep secrets from me. And that's a really big vulnerable space and the person might not be able to roll with that and they might dip out and that might feel like a rejection, but ultimately they're doing you a favor.

Deborah Simmons: Yeah. Well, here's the thing, I'd say to our Straight Spouses about vulnerability. You're vulnerable, no matter what you say, you're vulnerable. You're vulnerable to rejection. You're open to deceit and there's no stopping that. You, in fact, it's not like you're in vulnerable, if you don't disclose. You're vulnerable either way. So why not disclose?

Kristin Kalbli: Yeah. There's no getting around that. I think that's a really astute observation. There's no getting - we're raw, oftentimes when we come out of these relationships and so I think what I hear you're saying is kind of like, own it, rocket and roll with the vulnerability.

Deborah Simmons: Yes. I think that's true. I mean, and this may be a discouragement, but I will just say this. You know, having had this experience once before of having insufficient disclosure and there's no way to prevent this from happening again. Like you can get better at finding a lack of integrity. You can get better at your own self-disclosure, but the idea that you can get vaccinated and you're never going to get the smallpox, isn't what happens in relationships. People do change over time and there was no vaccination against relationship hurt of the same kind or of some other kind. We know in talking with so many people about their sexuality and relationships, it is a common experience for people who've been in a long-term relationship of any kind to feel like I took a wrong turn on the way to the fairy castle.

Kristin Kalbli: That it's still out there. Yeah. The twin flame thing is still out there.

Deborah Simmons: And so if you're going to enter a new relationship, that's a long-term one, the expectation that you're going to from time to time feel disappointed or that you're not going to get it perfectly right the next go round. But the ways in which you experience disappointment and relationship difficulty, and how you chose to overcome those, you bring those skills with you to the next relationship.

Kristin Kalbli: Right. So, well, I want to take a quick break and when we come back, I want to talk a little bit more about dating in this current climate that we have #me too going on and people are just like, "What do I do around all this?" So we'll be right back with more Deborah Simmons. (music) Hello, everyone. The Straight Spouse Network relies on a team of passionate, dedicated, and competent volunteers to keep it going. The SSN is looking to add a new social media manager, a volunteer program manager, a fundraising manager, and a grants manager to our team. The social media manager will push our blogs, podcasts, and other content to our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts on a regular schedule. The volunteer program manager will be in charge of all aspects of coordinating our volunteer force of support contacts and group leaders across the country. The fundraising manager will design and run our fundraising campaigns and the grants manager will seek out and apply for grants and manage our grants program. Now more than ever, we need good people. If you have a skill set, you think we could use, please contact execdirector@straightspouse.org. (music ends) And we're back with Deborah Simmons. So Deborah, you have written a pre-published book, that is, or co-written it and the working title is, "What's a Man To Do?" And which I think is great because in this particular era of #me too, the rules have all changed. So I want to take this last segment to talk about not necessarily the Straight Spouse experience, but dating now again, after a long time of not dating and going out there in this world and holy smokes, what, how do I even act in this environment?

Deborah Simmons: Exactly. It's a challenge for so many people and so my coauthor, Robert, Michael, and I wrote this book because he came to me with a question. We were just having a conversation one day, friends and friends talking, and he said, "In the era of #me too, I feel so timid in my relationships with women. I grew up in a time when I felt like I knew what was in-bounds and out-of-bounds and now when I see an attractive woman, who's behind the reception desk at the dentist's office and I want to tell her, "How lovely you're looking today, I think, is that okay?" So there's a lot of timidity, in what I will call loosely called good men. These are not abusers. These are just regular guys. Maybe they're looking to repartner, maybe they're not looking to partner. Maybe they're already happily partnered, but they engage with women in social situations and feel incredibly awkward now about what's acceptable and appropriate behavior.

Deborah Simmons: And so it's a challenge, for men and for women, and our book is a conversation back and forth between me and Bob, in which we ask each other and answer candid questions about our sexuality. About how do you want to be treated? And how does it feel when someone treats you this way and I'm in this situation and what do you think I should do? So we pose a lot of hypotheticals and we give examples from our own life to try to address this thorny issue about how to rebuild relationships in the wake of what we now know as the #me too movement.

Kristin Kalbli: So what, okay, what are some of the key takeaways in terms of how to rebuild these relationships? And the focus seems to be on men and what they what is inbounds and what's out of bounds and the rules are all messy. So how does a guy know what to do?

Deborah Simmons: So that you know where we landed on all of this after talking with so many people and finding out such a huge amount of variation from one person to the next. Is that the way forward for men and women is to learn to talk candidly about our sexuality because women are not all one thing and men are not all one thing. So our conversation is then practice for Bob and me talking about our sexuality and what we would want, and what we really encourage our readers to do is practice this. Not just in your dating life, talk to your friends, talk to your colleagues at work, this taboo topic, bring it to life in your conversations with others so you get better at it.

Kristin Kalbli: Oh, I have to stop you there because I can see myself talking about my sexuality a little bit with some of my friends. My girlfriends mostly, my guy friends it's still a little wonky to talk about sexuality. Friends at work though, I'm not in a traditional workplace anymore but work though, I could see like, wait a minute, this is absolutely what we should not be talking about in the face of # me too is any kind of sex whatsoever. No, wall it off, put it in a category, you know, put it in a compartment and wall it away, like holy smokes, n o.

Deborah Simmons: So, let's talk about that a little bit. To do things, there's a difference between sex and sexuality. So when I say talking about sexuality with others, that's something that stops at the bedroom door. Sex is the thing that happens on the other side of the bedroom door. So our sexuality is the way we engage socially with people, bringing our masculinity and femininity to those engagements and so, in the workplace, we bring our sexuality to the workplace. And part of the reason that things went have gone so awry in the # me too era and all the things that women are disclosing that happened to them in the workplace is because we bring our sexuality to the workplace and we don't talk about it. But we essentially say, from an HR perspective is, leave your sexuality at the door.

Deborah Simmons: We don't want it here but the thing is, it comes in the door with your hands and your feet and your head and you're bringing our bodies to work. And we are, again, there's a cloak of secrecy and silence and so things happen in the workplace that relate to people's sexuality and we've got no way of dealing with them. So when you say, "I don't want to talk to my colleagues about my sexuality," it's that may be true on the one hand but on the other hand, when you're walking past your colleagues and they're looking at your butt as you're going past and looking at their male colleague and going, "Yeah, I wouldn't get that out of bed." Those conversations are happening.

Kristin Kalbli: So

Deborah Simmons: They're happening covertly and so what I'm suggesting is that we have them overtly.

Kristin Kalbli: And that's the theme overall, right? Is to have these conversations in all arenas overtly.

Deborah Simmons: Right. It's essentially, let's take the taboo out of talking about sexuality. Let's take this cloak of secrecy, this willful ignorance that we have both collectively and individually. We are all estrogen and it's just not serving anyone at all.

Kristin Kalbli: What about, let's bring it back into the, in the last few minutes here, let's bring it back into the dating arena, just as some kind of like practical level advice for some of our - I have a soft spot for our male straight spouses because I do know that there they are recovering from these marriages in a way that their sexuality is often been sort of demeaned as predatory because they desired their wives. They wanted their wives, their wives, for reasons of sexuality of their own, they didn't necessarily want to be sexual with their husbands and so men are going out in the world with desire for women. They want to express their desire for women and many times they are terrified, frozen, paralyzed to express their desire for a female partner that they might be, you know, in a new relationship with or what have you, because their wife told them that you know, "You're always on me, get off me" because she was a lesbian, is not interested in having her husband touch her.

Kristin Kalbli: So this guy is in the dating world and he wants to tell a woman, he finds her beautiful. You know, sometimes women have the idea, like, I need you - to some women, not all women, women are all not one thing like you said but some women are like, "I need you to take charge. I need you to be the alpha male. I need you to show me." But in the #me too era, you don't know if you're going to be talking to a woman who's like, "Don't talk to me like that." So how does he move with his desire for a woman in this particular world right now on a date?

Deborah Simmons: You know, that is such a great question and it is the question around which our entire book is centered. Which is what's a good man to do? And the first thing he knows is he doesn't want to be a predatory man. He doesn't want to coerce, he doesn't want to traumatize and so how does he approach women and how does he take things to the next to the next step? And it's - I have a lot of empathy for men feeling sexually timid because of having been so brow beaten. I think sensitive men, even who don't have the straight spouse experience, feel brow beaten by the # me too disclosures that men are bad and they need to kind of rein themselves back. I would say this, that it's not a terrible thing to reign yourself back but it's important to ask for an invitation. Once you're invited, the step into that invitation is not coercive. And you might even be, you know if you think about it, like one man said to me that in order to, he's a young man in his late twenties said, "In my dating life, it's almost like mirandizing, you have the right to not go on to the next step." So he says, "I ask every step of the way before and in the middle and after. I like to put my arm around her shoulders. Would that be okay?"

Kristin Kalbli: That can be really sexy. I just want to say that, that can be really sexy.

Deborah Simmons: And then he puts his arm around her shoulders and says, " Oh, I like having my arm around your shoulders, how does that, feel to you?" You know, it's interesting and I just don't want to veer too much off topic because we're talking more about sexuality than sex, but one of the things I found in talking with people about sexuality is that people in the kink community who engage in BDSM, almost perfected the art of this step by step asking for permission because the thing they are doing might hurt the other person. And in that community, there's an incredible eroticizing of consent. And so when I gave that example about me, I'd put my shoulder, my arm on your shoulder. You're like, " Oh, that's very sexy." That's a thing that's been discovered in that community in particular. That asking for permission every step of the way, it can be really stilted and awkward, but it can move as you get more comfortable with it, can be an incredibly intimate and sexy thing .

Kristin Kalbli: I love, well, we can learn things from the kink and BDSM community around consent. And, I think some of our listeners might be like, "What and that's okay?" But we're talking about - we're not , I mean if you would want to go down that road, you go right ahead and cause there's some fun stuff down that road but if you don't want to go down that road, we're talking about just the idea of that they have basically really come to terms with asking for consent in a really kind of creative and interesting ways. So I'm glad that you brought that up because there is something to be, I think, vanilla relationships or quote unquote normal relationships, if there is such a thing, can learn from that aspect of sort of alternative sexualities as well.

Deborah Simmons: Yes. I think when you think about men being sexually timid, what they don't want to be is a rapist . What you and so we think about consent and under the law, consent is well, it's rape if I didn't have your consent and it's not rape if I had your consent and it's this legal construct but what I'm talking about is step wise consent. I really liked not to be a rapist, I'd like to be invited every step of the way, and you can gently and tenderly and in a very sexy way, ask for that consent as you go.

Kristin Kalbli: Right and with integrity, like with integrity, an openness and honesty like, "I find you really gorgeous. I would love to sit and have a drink with you."

Deborah Simmons: Right.

Kristin Kalbli: "And would that be okay?"

Deborah Simmons: And would that be okay and if she says no, you've ventured, you've asked for this consent for this little thing and you can easily step back. And so thinking about consent in steps is just, it's so much easier than you see a woman across the room. You walk up to her and say, "I love to take off your pants and have sex with me." It just isn't that because if you say yes, then it isn't rape. It's like, whoa, this is this very subtle and nuanced thing and get good... So my advice to those Straight Spouses who are men getting back out into the dating world is get really, really good step wise consent.

Kristin Kalbli: Right. And women, and for our women too, I mean, we really does go for women as well. I mean, we can do the asking as well.

Deborah Simmons: Absolutely true. Absolutely true. What man, wouldn't love for a woman on a date to say, "I would love to hold your hand, would that be okay?"

Kristin Kalbli: Right, right, right, right.

Deborah Simmons: It's not that hard. Conversations about sexuality, they're just not that hard. They're just not our habit.

Kristin Kalbli: And so it's practice, practice, practice, practice.

Deborah Simmons: Practice, practice, practice, practice with your friends, practice with your guy friends, practice with your gay friends, practice with your gals.

Kristin Kalbli: Right.

Deborah Simmons: Right. Yes, you're not practicing sex. You're practicing, talking about matters of sex and intimacy of sexuality and intimacy. Practice and you know if you can't quite bring yourself to practice with your next door neighbor and say, you know....

Kristin Kalbli: Yeah. If next door neighbor is like 95 year old grandma or something like that, you might dial that back but you never know s he might be secretly kind of wild.

Deborah Simmons: You know, sex is not a new invention per se, it was not invented by young people. No, it wasn't. You could practice in front of the mirror, look empathically into your own eyes, say some word of kindness and intimacy in approaching yourself. Right and until it feels natural to do that and before you can practice your story too, practice your disclosure.

Kristin Kalbli: Right . " This is where the relationship I just came out of, this is the relationship I'm still in. You know my wife lives in my house with me and we're separated and that." You know, Debra, I'm so excited about this conversation today because I feel like there are some really hopeful, even just baby steps that people can take as they're reacclimating themselves to talking about sex and sexuality in an open way with new potential partners and out there in the dating scene. And I just want to leave it, you know, our time is about up so I wanted to give an opportunity for you to leave any final thoughts for our listeners.

Deborah Simmons: Yes. I like to let your listeners know that you didn't end up in this situation because you did something wrong. We're doing the best you can or the best you could and it doesn't mean that you were doomed to a life perpetual relationship, difficulty. Take what you've learned, take your heart of empathy and kindness for your own self and when you step out into that dating world, practice so that you can start a new in a relationship that's a relationship that's kind and wholesome and fulfilling for you. So I'd like to say that as a word of encouragement to all of your listeners, you can do things differently next time.

Kristin Kalbli: I think that's a really hopeful and empowering message to leave right before our holiday break. I want to thank you Deborah for coming on the show today. It's been illuminating having you.

Deborah Simmons: It's been lovely to be here. Thank you. I've enjoyed it so much. Thank you.

Kristin Kalbli: Thanks to our listeners for tuning in today. This is a reminder that we are going on a two month break for the holidays so don't forget to join us again on February 1st, 2021, for all new episodes in season four. We've got some really interesting guests planned for you and know that we drop episodes on the first and 15th of every month. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast. Leave us a review on iTunes. Tell a friend about us. Getting our listenership up is really important because it lets the world know that Straight Spouses are here. We exist and they can begin to hear our stories and understand our experiences. I want to thank Drew at Gwynne Sound here in Cincinnati for being our engineer today. This is just a reminder that the views of the host, yours truly, are not necessarily the views of the Straight Spouse Network or its board of directors. This is Kristen, your host for the year signing off and reminding you to keep using your voice. Transcribed by: Designrr

Deborah Simmons Bio: Deborah Simmons is co-author of the pre-published book, "What's a Good Man to Do? A Candid Conversation about Sexuality." Today she shares how to open up to dating again after traumatic relationship experiences. She advises men how to navigate their desire for women during the #MeToo era, and shares tips for honesty in discussions around our own sexualities in new relationships. She shares advice for facing vulnerability when dating, embracing it, and finding meaning from those relationship traumas that can be carried forward into new relationships.