

From virginity to Viagra

February 10 2012

Americans will spend more than \$17 billion on Valentine's Day, but far less on programs like sex education for adolescents. The editors of the new book, *Sex for Life, From Virginity to Viagra, How Sexuality Changes Throughout Our Lives*, argue that not only do our public policies on sex education need to be reevaluated, our entire concept of human sexuality needs to be broadened.

"We don't really do a good job when we think about sex," says Dr. Laura Carpenter, an associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University and the co-editor of *Sex for Life*. "We think of people in terms of snapshots, say teenagers, or married people -- and we rarely think about older people. We cut off the earliest years and the oldest years when we talk about sexuality in this country."

Carpenter, the author of a previous book called *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, co-edited the new book with Dr. John DeLamater, Conway-Bascom Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The chapters in *Sex for Life*, each written by a different scholar, critically examine sexuality across the entire lifespan, exploring a wide variety of topics, including puberty, sexual initiation, coming out, sexual assault, marriage/life partnering, immigration, divorce and [widowhood](#). The authors also look at how gender, race and class shape sexuality. The book ultimately speaks to important public policy issues, such as [sex education](#), and the increasing politicization of scientific research. "Sex education needs to be a life long thing," argues Carpenter. "People's lives are always changing—they change partners and jobs and places of residence—and there are all sorts

of things like disability and chronic illness that affect people's [sexuality](#). But we rarely think about how those things might come together."

In the chapter "Starting Over," for example, author Bronwen Lichtenstein interviews middle-aged women who are beginning to date again after divorce, shedding light on their experiences and the risks to their health. "Attention to this topic is timely because STIs and HIV/AIDS have increased among middle-aged and older U.S. adults, especially women over 50 years old," says Prof. Lichtenstein. She argues that middle-aged women need to be educated about risk "in an era when both HIV and Viagra have complicated the dating terrain." Lichtenstein says most research focuses on teens and young adults, even though research shows that HIV cases among women age 50 and older have tripled in the last decade.

Provided by Sociologists for Women in Society

Citation: From virginity to Viagra (2012, February 10) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-virginity-viagra.html>

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