

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXXVI, Number 17, 8 February 2012 — Keeping sex healthy [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Keeping sex healthy

Pop culture pins the modern college as a hybrid between a fleshpot and a cesspool—all writhing, anonymous, diseased young bodies. That concern is real in some situations. But Columbia is, physically speaking, an exceptionally and shockingly sexually healthy university. What's more important in thinking about sex here, especially at this alternately warm and isolating time of year, is how it stacks up against emotional and relationship wellness at Columbia—and how we might use the momentum of our strong sexual health programs to heal the

gaps and cement that vital bond in our holistic, communal sexual-emotional wellness.

Many may feel, though, that Columbia's laurels in sexual health are overhyped. Many people I know scoffed when Trojan Condoms ranked Columbia first out of American campuses in sexual health, thinking it was just a representation of the number of condoms on campus. And that's understandable. Sexual health is an invisible benefit. A successful program prevents so much and works so subtly as to appear invisible and make every failure more glaring. But the Trojan award represents far more than condoms. Our HIV and other STD testing programs, sexual awareness and outreach initiatives, anonymous advice and peer groups, sexual assault response programs, and lastly the accessibility of all these resources, while flawed, are strong, interconnected, and effective. We have at least 15 student groups that I am aware of with some programming on sexual health. Go Ask Alice!, Columbia's health website, is a nationally recognized and lauded resource. In sum, it's an amazing array of resources.

Beyond the sexual safety that concerned the Trojan rankings, Columbia creates an environment where, if students utilize resources around them, the sex itself is quite good and diverse. That stands in some contrast to Maria Yagoda's article in the Yale Daily News ("Just say no [to awful sex]," Jan. 20), in which she indicted the male population of her school for non-communicative, self-focused, and unsatisfying sexual forays. While Yagoda believes it's a game of numbers, with few eligible men able with whom to get away with murder, an author responding on Jezebel points out that the shortcomings probably lie in communication and comfort ("Are Yale Guys Bad at Sex?" Jan. 25). Columbia encourages both of those. We have what I, as a consumer, believe to be one of the only sex-positive student magazines in the nation that doesn't sound like it's biting its pinky finger and winking at you in its popularly accessible and actually well-edited articles (full disclosure: I have written for the Morningside After in the past). We're one of the only campuses with communities encouraging engagement with, and consideration of, almost every (including the

oft-maligned kinky) type of sex. Even residential advisers, with condom bags on their doors, make a concerted effort to get students talking about sex, sexual preferences, and personal sexual satisfaction. One of my early assignments while working for Bwog involved covering an RA-sponsored expo of sex toys from the erotic boutique Babeland, which publicly and constructively proselytized the message of “relaxation, lubrication, and communication.”

Yet for all of this, the usage of many resources remains lower than it could be. Sex-positive events have minimal attendance and often attract the same people. While the sex at Columbia may be healthy and (potentially) good, that speaks only to the experience of those who have sex and utilize the resources that can help to improve their sex lives. Two anecdotes: Last year I cruelly forced a student group to meet on Valentine’s Day during dinner-and-date time. Attendance was normal. One club member mused that this was a telling reflection on all of our personal lives. More recently, a friend lamented the ease with which he can talk about and have sex, but the difficulty he has in having emotionally satisfying sex and finding long-lasting connections. Columbia’s abstract culture still holds up the image of a lonely and frustrated college student searching for physical and emotional satisfaction—the two of which should not often be decoupled.

We can applaud our phenomenal success in achieving sexual health for the sexually active population—for encouraging masturbation, self-knowledge, and self-satisfaction—and for the presence of an open and sex-positive environment. But our goal must extend to reaching populations who would not ordinarily engage with a sex-positive environment in ways that speak to their experiences and sensibilities. And we must not lose sight of the need to encourage emotional and relationship health in tandem with sexual health—again, as is the theme of this column, tying a vibrant singularity of wellness into a holistic wellness environment.

Columbia already has the infrastructure and the momentum to improve the emotional-sexual life of our student body. With some minimal effort, all of the groups on campus concerned with sexual health could flex their outreach programs to provide relationship advice, couples counseling, and even mixers to help those looking to find their special someones. But possibly more importantly, the existing resources at Columbia can and should each, within the next week, contact every other campus group and talk about co-hosting events relating to emotional-sexual relationship wellbeing. They should find points of overlap, produce novel events, and help to bring wellness and self-reflection on sexual, personal, and relationship wellbeing into every corner of the campus. And in the process, help people connect and grow this Valentine’s Day.

Mark Hay is a Columbia College senior majoring in religion and political science. He is a coordinator of the Student Wellness Project and the acting chair for the InterPublications Alliance. The Whole Wellness runs alternate Wednesdays.



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