

Reflections on AASECT's annual meeting

“This is what we
call safe sex in
New Orleans.”
— Smitty

Conferences are a place to learn, share ideas, engage in intellectual battles and inspire. At really great conferences, like AASECT's annual gatherings, participants often have many of these experiences, sometimes in the same day. After June's conference in New Orleans, two members wrote to us, sharing their commentaries. We include them here. If you have any additional experiences, we'd like to hear from you.

— Annette Owens, Editor

Five lessons sex therapists can learn from Cajun dancing

By Sari Eckler Cooper

After attending the wonderful AASECT conference in New Orleans in June and taking in all the inspiring ideas, exercises and emotions from the speakers and fellow attendees, I stayed on and went to Tipitina's Sunday night to dance at their weekly “Cajun Dance Fais-Dodo” — a dance party they've run for the last 17 years. For the uninitiated, Tipitina's began as a neighborhood bar, and became a world-renowned music hall of New Orleans music.

On arriving at Tipitina's, I was swept up by a man called Smitty. He brought all the bar patrons together in a circle to teach us the basic steps of Cajun dance and embrace his culture through dance. In one evening of dances with several local men I heard many sayings that can be useful to clients when they seek healing in our offices. So I compiled a list of the top five lessons we sex therapists can learn from Cajun Dancing.

1. As Smitty was twirling me again and again and I just couldn't stop laughing and smiling in joy he said: “Come on, let that little girl out to play.”

This invitation reminded me of D.W. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst, who stressed that creative play is a source of healthy ego strength and integrity. Authentic play is one that is without a specific goal or knowledge of what the steps are in getting from the beginning to the end of playtime. For many clients for whom anxiety prohibits connection with their own body's sensation and/or their connection with a partner, the concept of non-goal oriented sexuality is

extremely helpful. If we use the term play in treatment and ask them about other times in their life they were able to play in a relaxed, creative manner, we may then encourage them to explore how these interactions can be translated into their sex lives.

For others who may never have truly experienced true play due to traumatic histories, creative non-sexual play exercises (creating music or painting) that they can do on their own at first and then with a partner can help them access their creativity in safe steps. Clothes on touching of non-genital areas that are not considered triggers can incorporate game-like features like children do in clapping games that have no winners or losers.

2. As another slower Texas Two-Step waltz allowed me to catch my breath and I explained what conference my colleagues and I had been attending, Smitty smiled and said: “Well, this is what we call safe sex in New Orleans.”

This “lesson” reminded me of the wonderful Tantra workshops given at the conference by Sally Valentine and Suzie Heumann as well as the early morning class taught by Francesca Gentile and Stephen Braveman. These workshops got us up to move in ways we may not have been familiar with to awaken our mind to new thoughts, our bodies to new movements, and our spirits to new possibilities.

In my practice, I am always on the lookout for creative practices my clients might have done as children or are doing currently that make them feel relaxed, engaged and passionate. The more we can encourage clients to explore new or old ways to engage their physicality and spirit, the wider a repertoire of pleasurable, erotic safe sex they will have to explore.

3. At Tipitina's it is expected that both women and men can invite one another to dance.

Treatment often reveals the pressure some partners feel in continually playing the role of initiator. I've heard many people say: “After constantly getting rejected I finally just stopped asking.” This statement, when it gets unpacked in treatment, can bring up feelings of frustration, shame and abandonment by the initiator and the pressure or sense of intrusiveness felt by the partner who has been approached. But if we explore it from a systemic stance regarding the roles each partner has adopted, we offer them the opportunity to discuss and empathize with the pressures that both these roles can impose on the other.

By offering them a chance to try the other role on for a while as a take-home exercise they can challenge their beliefs about themselves and their partner while freeing the relationship from a rigid structure. I've heard men say in treatment: "I'm so stressed from work all week; I would love it if she initiated and allowed me to be more of a follower in sex sometimes."

The discussion of being the invitee in sex offers our couples the opportunity to discuss a myriad of beliefs, fears and expectations that can be understood and at times shifted in subtle or at times more global ways. The underlying meanings of initiation and being invited can include how one feels about being a man/woman in their social/family context, their level of self-esteem, and the level to which they feel entitled to get their attachment needs met.

4. "No need to apologize, my wife and I agreed a long time ago to forget about the apologies and just keep on dancing."

This was a response I got after apologizing to my partner after tripping over my feet at the beginning of a quick Zydeco tune. This saying is so important for our clients for whom the perfect sexual interaction becomes a goal and source of pressure for both partners. The understanding we can give these clients that there may be times that sex is just okay, downright unsatisfying or at times fantastic teaches them a resilience in the face of disappointment while still being able to stay connected to their partner.

5. Our spirit is ageless when fully and creatively engaged in an activity.

All through the night I had watched a tall, lithe, red-haired woman dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots dance with her much younger partner. The woman's face showed years of experience, while her body expressed vitality and grace. I leaned to my neighbor and asked if the graceful redhead had been a professional dancer and old she was. He chuckled and said: "No, she just dances four times a week around town. As far as her age goes, we say somewhere between 40-70!"

When our clients come in angry, disappointed and ashamed about the way their bodies are functioning, our goal is to help them heal from the loss of their former physical health, encourage them to find a new union between their "new" bodies and the spirit and mind that allowed them to feel vital in the past. Many women in my practice reveal the shame and embarrassment around the way their bodies look. As a therapist I collaborate with clients on activities they can find which will allow them to feel their bodies' strength and ability from the inside as opposed to how they look to others.

Cajun dance offered me a night of pure enjoyment and more reminders to bring back to my clients. I can't wait to go back to my Tango lessons!

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