

## **SEXUAL ENERGY SERIES-4: Surprising Science About Human Desire – Justin Lehmiller, Ph.D. – #790**

Announcer:

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Dave Asprey:

You're listening to Bulletproof Radio with Dave Asprey. The guest today is Justin Lehmiller, PhD whose one of the leading experts you'll find on human sexuality. He writes the really popular blog, Sex and Psychology. He's also one of five sexperts you need to follow on Twitter according to Men's Health, and a modern day master of sex according to Nerve. How they know that, I don't really know, but I bet they could tell us.

He's also a social psychologist and Research Fellow at The Kinsey Institute. He's published about 50 academic works on things like casual sex, sexual fantasy, and friends with benefits. So if you're listening to this with some young people, I'm pretty sure we're going to talk about some very fun things that you might not want to share on this episode depending on their age.

That's up to you as the parent, because it turns out, sex actually isn't early and unhealthy thing. It's a thing that all people do, that's why we have kids. So, if this bothers you, you can skip the episode, but seriously, if this bothers you, you should listen to the episode even more, probably the part on BDSM.

Now that I've said that, Justin, welcome to the show.

Justin Lehmiller:

Hey Dave, thanks for having me.

Dave:

The reason I wanted to reach out to you is the title of your book was beautiful. It says, Tell Me What You Want: The Science of Sexual Desire and How It Can Help Improve Your Sex Life. You had this huge survey of what people's fantasies are, and since a lot of people will say one thing but do another and this was an anonymous survey, it feels like you got really good data.

No. 1, thank you for doing that. No. 2, what's the biggest thing you learned from the survey, tell me about it?

Justin Lehmiller:

Well, I learned a lot of things in the course of conducting the survey. I studied the sexual fantasies of 4,175 Americans who came from all 50 states. They ranged in age from 18 to 87, come from very diverse backgrounds and they completed this 369 question survey that I created. The 69 was not intentional, just worked out that way.

But I ask people about their favorite fantasy of all time, hundreds of people, places, things they've ever fantasied about. Their personality, their sexual history, their demographics because I really wanted to understand, not just what are people fantasizing about, but what do our fantasies say about us.

I wrote this whole book that does a deep dive into our sexual fantasies and what they mean and God, there's so many things that are interesting about it. But for me, personally, something I thought was really fascinating was, how our sexual fantasies are related to our age because this has never really

been addressed before. Almost all the studies of sexual fantasies that are published in academic journals are based on college students. What I found is that honestly college students are the most boring group of people you could study if you want to learn about sexual fantasies.

What I see in the data is that, it's really people in their 40s and 50s who have the most adventuresome sexual fantasies. And those types of fantasies we're talking about very taboo activities, novel, new and different activities, multi-partner activities, non-monogamous types of arrangements. These types of fantasies are all more common in that sort of midlife range compared to college students.

That in and of itself is interesting just because we stereotype college students as being hypersexual and always down for threesomes, but that's not really the reality.

Dave:

I would not have wanted to have sex with me when I was in college because I don't think I was that skilled yet. Like it takes practice to get good, right?

Justin Lehmiller:

It does. Like everything else, sex is a skill, you learn it.

Dave:

It sounds like your first piece of advice is that college students should hook up with someone over 40? Did I hear that right?

Justin Lehmiller:

I don't know that I'm going to phrase it exactly that way, but I think one takeaway from this is that, in our culture we tend to prioritize youth and consider that to be more attractive. But young people might not be the best sexual partners, because they're not the most practiced and experienced. I think that's why, for example, you see somebody, young people who have MILF fantasies or DILF fantasies. They want to be with that older more experienced partner or a teacher who knows what they're doing.

Dave:

So Mrs. Robinson was right?

Justin Lehmiller:

Maybe so.

Dave:

All right, I'm sure you've asked, in fact, I know you've answered this question before, but I would be a bad host if I didn't ask you. What is your top sexual fantasy?

Justin Lehmiller:

So I do get asked that question a lot, but I'm going to give you the same answer I give everyone else, which is that, I don't talk about my own sexual fantasies publicly. The reason for that is because, no matter what my fantasies are, people are going to then filter everything that I say through the lens of

my own views. And so, I like to try and stick to the science and make it less about me, because this is not a book about my fantasies or wants. It's about what you want, and it's...

Dave:

You don't want to be known as the guy with the fetish for inflatable baked goods or something like that?

Justin Lehmiller:

Well that would be a new one, I've not heard of that fantasy before.

Dave:

I was trying to make up one that couldn't exist, because I don't think they make inflatable baked goods, so I was pretty sure I got one.

Justin Lehmiller:

Hey, if you can think of it, there's probably porn for it, so I'm going to go do a search after this interview is done.

Dave:

Oh my God, if there is, I'm just going to laugh. All right, now, so much of what you do is taboo and we always deal with taboo stuff with either, well humor if it's uncomfortable. I frankly just think this stuff was funny, but maybe I have some sense of discomfort that I don't know about. How do you get people to talk about what they really want?

Justin Lehmiller:

Something that I find really interesting is that, people have a really hard time talking about sex with their partners. I find that many of my participants have never shared their fantasies with a partner before, but they're going to share with some anonymous stranger over the internet, me, right?

I think people really want to talk about these types of things, but they don't have safe spaces in which to do that. And so many people are worried about their partner judging them or shaming them for their fantasies. So when you have a chance to talk about it in the context of an anonymous survey, I find that people often come out of the woodwork because they've never had a chance to really do this before.

And an interesting observation I've made is that, when I do studies of sex in general, disproportionately my respondents are women. But when I study sexual fantasies in particular, I get as many men as I do women or more men than women. I think that's because there's so many guys who just never have a chance to talk about their fantasies, and so having this opportunity is kind of cathartic for them.

Dave:

What's going on? Okay, you're a guy and you want to try something and you're with a woman in some kind of a relationship. You could say, "Hey, I want to try X," but there's something that stops us from saying that. What is that thing?

Justin Lehmiller:

It's that fear. It's that we tend to think that our fantasies are weird, abnormal, strange, unusual, and I see this on my own data. I ask people, "How common do you think your favorite fantasy of all time is?" No matter what their fantasy was, my participants underestimated how common that fantasy was. The rarer they thought it was, the more shame, guilt, embarrassment, anxiety they felt, and that's really what holds people back. They're worried about what other people will say or think, and they don't accept themselves for the interest that they have.

I think so much of it is, we have this lack of education about what's normal when it comes to sex. That leads to the shame and that leads people to bottle everything up.

Dave:

Is the solution to that different for men and women on average?

Justin Lehmiller:

In terms of how we deal with...

Dave:

Yeah, in terms of how to deal with them. You just said, men apparently report more fantasies than women if I'm paraphrasing you right. But the idea of asking for what you want, I mean is it the same recipe for to sit down with your partner and say, "I've really thought about X," and then seeing if your partner runs away screaming? How do we do that?

Justin Lehmiller:

Right, so there are some interesting gender dynamics. One is that, men on average feel more shame about their fantasies than women do. So before you can get to that point of actually sharing your fantasy with a partner, there's some work that we need to do on ourselves to get that level of self-acceptance that's going to open the door to having productive and healthy conversations.

Men might actually have a higher hurdle to clear in the sense that, they're starting with a higher baseline of shame. Then, when it comes to actually sharing your fantasies, men and women on average have some differences in what it is that turns them on. And so, when we're talking about sharing them, sometimes you're going to find that one partner's turned on by something that the other partner isn't, and how do you deal with that type of situation?

I think when people are sharing their fantasies, regardless of their gender, it's important to start low, go slow. Share your more vanilla tame sexual fantasies first, build up trust and intimacy and communication before you get to your deeper, more adventurous some types of fantasies. Because if you don't have that baseline of trust and communication, it's going to be a heck of a lot harder to put yourself in that position of vulnerability where you're sharing your deepest fantasy. Also, to get that non-judgmental reaction from your partner.

Dave:

What's the first thing that you say more vanilla fantasies, so how does the conversation go? Let's say that you're a woman and you want to try something that you never tried before?

Justin Lehmiller:

Yeah, so I think when you're sharing a fantasy with a partner, it requires first figuring out the right time and place to do this so choose your time wisely. Ideally pick a time when you're both sexually aroused,

because research shows that when we're sexually aroused, our disgust response lessens. So, if you're sharing a sexual fantasy that your partner might not necessarily be receptive to in general, if you can do it in a state of sexual arousal, odds are they'll be more receptive and open to the idea.

Now, in terms of sharing the fantasies, you also have to manage your partner's insecurities, because when you say, "Hey, I want to try something new," people have a tendency to think like, "Oh, what's wrong? Like my partner isn't into me anymore. They're not happy with the sex we're having." You have to have the right psychological framing for it, where you validate your partner. Tell them how hot the sex you're having is, how attractive you think they are and here's this new, fun thing you guys can try together that you might both really enjoy.

I think if you frame it that way and you try to manage your partner's insecurities, that can go a long way toward having a more productive conversation about your fantasy no matter what it is.

Dave:

What are the most common male insecurities that a woman or I guess a man with a man would have to deal with?

Justin Lehmiller:

Speaking beyond shame, when I look at men's sexual fantasies and women's sexual fantasies, I find that no matter what their gender is, people are often trying to meet various emotional needs through their fantasy. But the biggest one that cuts across gender is this wanting to feel wanted.

People want to feel desired, and so that's really why I give that advice of validating your partner, making them know how much you want them, desire them. How much they turn you on, because that really seems to be crucial for sexual arousal no matter what your gender or sexual orientation might be.

But for men in particular, there's also lots of concerns about feeling sexually incompetent or that their performance is going to be less than. And so it's also managing that kind of performance anxiety issue with men in particular that's important to address. If you present your fantasy in a way that makes your partner feel threatened, that can lead to a host of performance issues in the bedroom.

Dave:

Okay, so for women it's don't scare the guy because he can't get it up if I translated that right?

Justin Lehmiller:

Exactly.

Dave:

Okay, I hear you there. What about if we switch it around, so guy wants to try something new, what are the most common insecurities that he's going to face with his partner?

Justin Lehmiller:

Well depends a bit on what the fantasy is, so I find that men in general have more fantasies about threesomes and about open relationships and just non-monogamy in general. And so when men are sharing these fantasies about bringing somebody else into the bedroom, or going off and doing something with a new partner, there's that potential threat to their female partner who might say, "Well, why do you want to sleep with other people? And are you going to get emotionally involved with them in addition to being sexually involved with them?"

It's really kind of, if you're dealing with any type of non-monogamy fantasy, it's managing that jealousy is really what's at the root of it. Some people are able to find productive ways through it, other people aren't. Non-monogamy is not for everyone, even though it's something that most people have fantasied about at one time or another.

Dave:

I have a group of friends in the Bay Area tech community, many of them have just said, "Oh this is rational, so we're going to try and practice non-monogamy," usually in their mid to late 20s and early 30s. And 99% of them are like, "Oh my God, this is really hard. I don't think it actually works but it should work, it just doesn't work."

I also have some friends who are in their 50s who are very happy non-monogamists, but it feels like for them to get to the point where they could do it happily and sustainably in a healthy relationship, whether it's just an occasional swinging or just full on polyamory, they had to really do a lot of personal development work before they were all ready to...

Justin Lehmiller:

It's so true. I mean I think there are some people who look at polyamory and they say that that's a more evolved way of being. And so, they feel like it's more natural and so they pursue it for that reason, but that's not the right reason to do it. You have to do it because it's something you really want to do, and I think you have to know yourself really well. What's your personality type? What's your attachment style? What's your proneness to jealousy?

Some people, I don't think can ever get past those issues, and so monogamy is the right answer for them and there's nothing wrong with that. But if you want to explore polyamory, open relationships, swinging or also cuckolding where you're bringing somebody else into your bedroom and watching your partner have sex with them, all of these things require very careful jealousy management and a lot of work on the self first.

Dave:

That last one seems like it's been, cuckolding, it seems like it's been in a bunch of movies lately. Like it's been a meme on the internet, is that a relatively new fantasy that people are just catching onto? Or has it always been one that's just been in the darkness but the porn industry brought it out?

Justin Lehmiller:

There are lots of historical writings on this. Cuckolding is not a new interest, but I think we now have a term for it. The internet has allowed people to, with different sexual interests to connect and find communities of like-minded others. And so, I think it's really just come out of the shadows more rather than it being a brand new type of interest.

Dave:

There's a word called compersion, which is basically is receiving pleasure from watching someone else get pleasure, which would be a part of the whole world. Sounds like that's a real thing, but is compersion a real human drive or something that exists? Or is this a made out part of that life?

Justin Lehmiller:

That's a great question, and I've actually done a lot of research on people in polyamorous relationships. In fact, a few years ago, some of my colleagues and I surveyed more than 3,000 people who identify as polyamorous at a time when there was almost no research on this topic. We wanted to better understand, what's going on here? How do they navigate their relationships? How do they deal with issues like jealousy?

We gave people standard jealousy scales that relationship researchers use, but we also gave people open-ended questions. One of them said, "What else would you like to tell us about how you experience jealous or manage or deal with jealousy in your relationship?" We had many participants who wrote in, "I don't know what jealousy is, that's not an emotion that I experience."

And so, it seems that there are some people who, when their partner's getting pleasure or attention from somebody else, that they don't take it personally. They really take joy and pleasure and excitement in that, but I think the question is, why can some people do that but others can't? I think that's a lot that we don't understand yet.

Dave:

It's interesting, from my perspective and I want to know how common this is, this is why I'm telling you this. Like anything that brings my partner more pleasure, I'm all for it. That's part of my job, is like let me help you get off in whatever way you want, because I like having you get off. I don't think I have that jealousy stuff, but I'm in a monogamous relationship.

It's one of those weird things throughout all of my relationships where I'm like, "Whatever you like, the world's your oyster," but that hasn't been a big part of my past there. It's interesting when you say, other people who are like that it would just drive them nuts and you can be the only source of your partner's pleasure. To me, that feels like insecurity. Is there something deeper than insecurity driving them?

Justin Lehmiller:

Part of it is personal insecurity, but I think part of it too is just culturally learned. What do we see as our models for relationships? What you see depicted in the media, what limited information you might have about your parents relationship or your friends relationships. Where also they're given this impression that there's one perfect person out there for you, a soulmate. And when you find that person, you two are enough for each other in all ways and you should never need to bring somebody else in.

And so, part of it is just that long hell of ideal that people have that yard stick that they're measuring themselves up against.

Dave:

I guess when I was, I go back in 25 years when I was in my 20s, it was still really common for guys to be really just freaked out if their girlfriend got a vibrator. Like, "Oh my God can it reflect..." there's so much weird insecurity about that, and I think the world has moved on a little bit where we have a draw full of them. We pick the right one for the occasion for certainly a good number of friends that I have. Has the shame of sex toys gone down a lot?

Justin Lehmiller:

It has gone down to a degree and certainly we can see that evidenced in surveys, where we ask people about their experiences using sex toys. You can also see it in burgeoning sales and the growth of this

massive sex tech industry. Acceptance is increasing, but it's still, there's not as much uptake especially among men in particular.

If you look in the US, it's only about a third of guys say that they've ever used a sex toy during masturbation before, or as a majority of women have done so. But if you look at more sex positive cultures like Germany, the numbers are much higher for men's engagement in using these toys.

I think part of it is, there's still a bit of a cultural stigma and a taboo against men using sex toys. And so, a lot of guys don't engage with them in part because they think, "Oh this would make me gay or whatever if I used the toy. Or if my partner needs to use a toy in bed that, that makes me less than or I can't fully pleasure her." For heterosexual men in particular, there's often a lot of insecurity tied up in their view of sex toys.

Dave:

I guess my advice if you're one of those guys listening for what it's worth being, well, I don't know, I think I'm an expert. But it would be that, you should have the right tool for the job. There's no shame in saying, "I use technology to get the results I want." Biohacking is kind of about that, so you know what? Find the right tool and if it's a much better night as a result of having a whole bedroom full of toys, then you're missing out. It's like if you're going to build your house with just a chisel and a hammer, come on, we have the chain saws.

Justin Lehmler:

It's true and there's also a lot to be said just for sexual novelty. Human beings are inherently turned on by new things in the bedroom, and toys and tech is an easy way to add that to some novelty that creates a more immersive experience. It takes arousal to a much higher level. Can potentially give you a more intense orgasm, so there's all kinds of potential benefits you might be able to tap into by using toys.

Also, there's some research finding that men who use masturbation sleeves that, that can actually be a treatment for premature ejaculation. As well as guys who have an issue with delayed ejaculation, where they find it hard to have an orgasm. What the studies show is that, using these toys can actually teach guys how to have better ejaculatory control. And so, it can actually improve sexual functioning if you're dealing with some of those issues.

Dave:

Well, I think that's fantastic and I know a good number of guys listening. In fact, my first thought was, "You mean oh having a hard time ejaculating? Oh poor you." I've never said this on the show before, and this is definitely not the kids issue. When I was a teenager, I was terrified that when I finally had sex that I would be one of those premature ejaculators. I know I probably saw some movie making fun of that, so I'm like, I'll just masturbate until I almost cum and then I'll stop, and then I'll do it again what you'd call edging.

Apparently, I got really good at not orgasming until I wanted to because my first experience was very satisfying for both of us. But it was really entirely born out of fear and insecurity when I think back on it. I've written, I've even published a year of my ejaculation data, because there is a very clear evidence that when a guy ejaculates the next day the testosterone drops a lot. There is an orgasm hangover for a lot of guys, where the next day you're going to expect me in the morning. It's hormonal for some guys, at least according to the experts I've interviewed about it.

Did any of that come up in your survey or in your experience? Oh I really have this hot fantasy, but now I am sticky and I'm covered in body parts or whatever the heck it is and now I feel really bad about it, is there a come down and a hangover for these things?

Justin Lehmiller:

Yeah, and I'll give you an answer to that in one second, because what you were talking about just before that reminded me of a quote I often like to say, which is that, one person's sexual problem is another person's sexual fantasy.

So the idea of premature ejaculation, for some people this is a problem, a source of distress in their life. But for others it's, "I would love to be able to cum so quickly." Some people also fetishize it, that they actually take a partner's premature ejaculation as a sign of their overwhelming desire for you.

It actually is very much eroticized, so I just think that's always interesting when we're talking about what a sexual disorder is and isn't, because it's highly subjective. And so, when we start labeling and putting numbers on like, well if you orgasm in less than this amount of time, that's clinically a problem. Well maybe not, maybe it is for some people, but not for everyone.

Dave:

I have a small group of friends where we've just decided we're just going to be open about sex. Not with each other, but just like to be able to talk about it with close, personal friends. One of them, the wife, she's like, "If I can't get him off with a blowjob in under a minute, I'm not a good wife." It's like all right, he better not a premature ejaculate or things aren't going to go well there. For her, like you're saying, it is absolutely like a sign of, "I'm doing a good job."

To me, the variety there is fascinating. Just having a few good safe friends who are like, "Oh yeah, you guys are not... That's weird." But not weird in a, "I disrespect you," but, "I wonder why you like that," sort of thing. It's been actually really relaxing to have a few friends like that and just to be open and non-judgmental, but I recognize a lot of people don't have that or you say something and it gets out and whatever.

How comes when someone talks about a fantasy and then their partner throws it out there on the internet or they're publicly ashamed for it or things like that, is that a big deal?

Justin Lehmiller:

We know that that does happen and this is part of the reason why people are reluctant to share their fantasies is, because they're worried about a partner weaponizing that fantasy against them in the future. We've actually seen this happen and come out for example in divorce proceedings. Where one partner tries to use the other partner's sexual fantasies or desires as a weapon against them, to gain custody of their shared children or something along those lines.

There's a group called the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom that documents and tracks these kinds of cases. And whether or not extraordinarily common, we do know that they exist. Sometimes that has really serious consequences for your personal life and livelihood. And so, as long as we allow our fantasies to be weaponized, because we stigmatize certain types of consensual sexual desires, that contributes to this culture of fear and shame about our fantasies that prevents us from communicating about them and really getting what we want out of our sex lives.

Dave:

I've made it a point in my life to pretty much try everything that I'm afraid of that isn't dangerous and I don't mean just in the bedroom. I just mean in life in general, so fasting for four days in a cave all by myself when I'm afraid of being alone and starving, check, I'll do that. So one of those things like if I'm afraid of it, there's probably something there for me.

Many, many, many years ago in the Bay Area I took like a weekend seminar on BDSM, because I'm like I don't know anything about this. I'm curious and I'm open-minded, and it was one of the things that it was just a class like you go and you attend a lecture kind of. One of the people teaching stood up and said, "Look, I'm teaching because I've had great value in my life from this."

This group is called the Society of Janus and I think they're well-known in that world, but I don't know if they exist anymore. She stood up and said, "I'm a public school teacher, and if it got out that I did this, I would probably lose my job. But I'm teaching this class because I think it's worth it." But there was palpable fear and granted this was 25 years ago or something. And it feels like things have shifted a little bit, but there's a lot of professions where if you admit to having... Your survey says are abundantly common fantasies, your employer can use it against you. Or your employees can use it against you, not just your wife.

How often do people lose their jobs, not because they had fantasies or did stuff at work, but because in their extracurricular activities they did something that got out?

Justin Lehmillier:

Yeah, I don't have specific numbers for that, but we do know that it happens. It's more likely to happen for some people in certain professions and environments than others. So for example, if you work at a religiously affiliated institution-

Dave:

Yeah, sure.

Justin Lehmillier:

... and it comes out that you're engaged in BDSM or some of these other types of activities, you risk. But I think it really depends on who your employer is, where you live, because sexual moral values are so relative. They vary so much just even within the United States in terms of what is considered acceptable so this happens. It's a greater risk for people in more conservative environments than it is for others. But something interesting about that is that, I find that conservatives actually have more taboo fantasies in general than liberals do.

Dave:

Yeah.

Justin Lehmillier:

And that part of that is because they've got so many more restrictions placed on their sexuality. When we have these things that we're told we can't do, that makes us want to do them even more. This is part of the reason why I think we often see conservative man [inaudible 00:28:58] and these sex scandals where they publicly said, "No, you shouldn't do this," but then they're caught doing that very thing that they advocated so strongly against.

Dave:

I think it was xHamster which was a very common free porn site, and they published data from a state that had just made porn illegal. I don't remember, something, Alabama or somewhere. Do you know what I'm talking about? What state was it?

Justin Lehmiller:

I don't remember the state off the top of my head.

Dave:

They put something forward and they're like, "Well let's just talk about what people in this state like." And that state was like the very most exotic fantasies you could think of and lots of gay and group sex. I think it was the anti-homosexual legislation some sort or another, and it was like holy crap. So they highlighted with raw data what people want versus what they say they want. That was what your survey did I think in a maybe more of a structured way.

But honestly, what are people logging into from that state is raw data. Did you find alignment with what that said, with what you learned? Is that what you would have expected?

Justin Lehmiller:

Yeah, I mean my political findings didn't really surprise me, because there have been a lot of studies conducted. Sometimes using big data from xHamster and some of these other big porn sites, where they look at, what are the searches? How did they match up with where people live? Also, if you look at Google search trends, you see that people in more conservative states Google the most porn. And so, in my data I find that there's also that link between conservatives and then having more taboo sexual fantasies, and so it all lines up in a way.

Dave:

Okay, so what are the most common taboo sexual fantasies you'd find amongst conservatives versus liberals? Like is there a difference?

Justin Lehmiller:

There is, and so when I looked at the things that conservatives were more likely to fantasize about, they were often revolved around group sex, there were orgies, non-monogamy, things like swinging and cuckolding in particular. Also, just...

Dave:

That's funny because conservatives will call liberals cocks, right?

Justin Lehmiller:

Exactly, which is [crosstalk 00:31:06].

Dave:

Apparently they're the ones who have more of an interest in that, okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

There might be a little bit of a projection going on.

Dave:

Okay.

Justin Lehmilller:

But yeah, I mean I actually wrote an article in the last couple of months about the whole Jerry Falwell Jr. Scandal.

Dave:

Right.

Justin Lehmilller:

Because it's really all about cuckolding and the psychology behind by conservative men who seem to be more drawn to it. So, that non-monogamy group sex taboo activities like exhibitionism and voyeurism, those types of things were all more common on the conservative side of the aisle. But on the Democratic side, the one thing they were more likely to fantasize about was actually BDSM and power play.

I think ultimately part of the explanation for that is that, we're all drawn to what we're told we can't or shouldn't do. It's...

Dave:

BDSM is more common you said for liberals or for...

Justin Lehmilller:

For liberals.

Dave:

Oh interesting, okay.

Justin Lehmilller:

Yeah, sorry if I said that wrong.

Dave:

No, I just wanted to make sure I heard the thing right. So then someone who's neutral likes to be tied up while they're cuckolded and then everything's good?

Justin Lehmilller:

Yeah, they're into everything.

Dave:

Okay.

Justin Lehmilller:

But I think part of the appeal of BDSM to liberals might be that, for people who are politically liberal they believe in these ideals of a quality and a level playing field. And so, playing with these power differentials is really a big taboo, and that might be what draws them to it.

Dave:

Okay, got it. So in that case, it's because well BDSM is kind of inherently unfair. Okay, and if you believe in a world of fairness and then okay. It's ultimately about creating variety, whatever you're supposed to be doing, you want to do the opposite in the bedroom, okay.

Well, in your book you write about in an order the most common sexual fantasies are group sex, power controlled rough sex, novelty, adventure variety. Is that a good list? It seems very vague though. What stands out in that? Is like group sex, is it threesomes or are we talking like full on orgies?

Justin Lehmillier:

Yeah, so the categories are intentionally broad because I wanted to look at, what are the bigger themes in our fantasies? In the multi-partner theme, the single most common thing that people fantasize about is a threesome. In fact, more than a third of my participants said their favorite fantasy of all time is a threesome. So this is extraordinarily popular and most men and women, more than 90% say they fantasied about a threesome before. So that's really the biggest one that comes out in that category for the...

Dave:

What percentage is man, woman, woman versus woman, man, man? Is it equal?

Justin Lehmillier:

It depends on your gender, right?

Dave:

Okay, cool. Spell it out, who likes what?

Justin Lehmillier:

And it also depends on your sexual orientation, right? So if we're talking about heterosexual men, yeah. By far they fantasize about the female, female, male version. Heterosexual women fantasize about that a little less, but they fantasize more about the male, male, female version.

I think part of that is that, when people picture a threesome and they describe it to me, most of them talk about wanting to be at the center of attention. And so, they want two people ideally of the gender that they're most attracted to or primarily or only attracted giving them that attention.

When men are thinking about a FFM type threesome with their partner involved, he's the center of attention. And so, when he pitches that scenario to his female partner, she's like, "Well, what's in it for me? It's all about you." Regardless of gender, most people want to be the center of attention, and part of that leads us to have different gender compositions of the threesomes that we want.

Dave:

Most of the swingers I've talked to and I'm fortunate that I have the kind of friends that I can talk to openly about this kind of stuff. Especially the guys have confidentially said that the reason they're

swingers is so that their female partner can be with another female partner, and like half the time I'm just standing back. Is that really common or do I just have weird friends?

Justin Lehmiller:

No, I mean that is common, that women in general have more of what we call sexual fluidity or sexual flexibility or erotic plasticity. Whatever term it is that you want to apply, women tend to be a bit higher on that. What that means is that, heterosexual women are much more open to the idea of a same sex experience than are heterosexual men.

Many of them never have a chance to really experience that in the context of a monogamous relationship, and so I think that is part of what draws some people to swinging, is that it's a chance to express bisexual fantasies.

Dave:

How valid is the Kinsey's Gale? Okay, you work for The Kinsey Institute, but the Kinsey's Gale been out for God knows like since like the 1960s I think, where they're basically plotting people's sexuality, whether they're purely homosexual or purely heterosexual on a curve. Does the research you and others in the field have done over the last 50 years, does it bare out the validity of that scale or is that old school?

Justin Lehmiller:

I would say it does and that Kinsey was actually onto something by putting sexual orientation or sexual traction on a continuum. Because overtime we actually got away from the Kinsey scale in the '90s and early 00s. We tended to really think about sexual orientation as being these three discrete categories. You're gay, straight, or bi, but bi isn't really a thing, it's just what people say who are gay but don't want to come out yet.

We tended to view sexual orientation to this very binary kind of lens, like either gay or straight. But increasingly we've gone back to that dimensional structure and started plotting sexuality back on this continuum. So I think Kinsey really was onto something, but what we're seeing today is that sexuality is so much more complex and diverse. People have so many more identities than ever it existed at the time that Kinsey did his work.

And so, how we best measure sexual orientation I think is something that is still very much up for debate, and something researchers constantly argue about. Like, what's the best way to measure orientation? Is it through genital arousal or is it through your self-reported sexual identity? Is it through your previous sexual behavior? These things all tell us something different, and ultimately when you put them together, they just tell us that sexuality is so complex.

Dave:

And your data shows that apparently it changes overtime anyway, right? So okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

Well yeah, and even your sexual attractions based on gender can change overtime. This is something that psychologist Lisa Diamond has done a lot of work on with her research on sexual fluidity, where she mostly studied women in the beginning but later expanded it to include men. But she finds that for many people, their identity label, their behavior, their attraction patterns to men and to women changes over the course of their lives.

Dave:

Wow!

Justin Lehmilller:

Even our gender-based attractions aren't necessarily stable, because some people experience this sexual fluidity. There's some people who'll find that concept really threatening, because how does that match up with the whole born this way argument that's been used as the basis for arguing for gay rights, right? There's a bit of conflict in intention.

Dave:

Oh interesting, I never even thought of that. I have two friends I can think of who would just identify as bi. Actually, one of them is married, and the other one isn't. But, they have said that they feel shunned by both gay cultures like, "Well you're not gay," and by straight culture, "Well you're not straight." So they feel like, "I don't have any friends," but the data that I saw a very long time ago, I took a class called human sexuality in my undergrad where I'm picking this from.

It seems like there's way more bi people than there are on either purely 100%, never had a thought about anyone else. What's going on in that dynamic based on what you've learned?

Justin Lehmilller:

Yeah, so the B in LGBTQ is by far the largest component of that community. In fact, in the last decade the number of people who identify as bisexual has actually tripled in the United States.

Dave:

Oh really? I didn't know that. Okay.

Justin Lehmilller:

Whereas the number who identify as gay or lesbian has stayed the same, so bisexuals far outnumber people with gay and lesbian identities now. But there is still this prejudice and bias against bisexual people. If you look at attitudes toward gays and lesbians over the last 20 years, they've moved from negative to positive. But if you look at attitudes toward bisexuals, they've moved from negative to neutral. They haven't crossed over into that positive territory, and I think it's because there's a lot of people who are still really skeptical of bisexuality. Thinking that it's just a, as Carrie Bradshaw once famously said on Sex and the City, it's just a layover on the way to gay town. I think that there's a lot of people who still think of it-

Dave:

I've never heard of it, that's awesome.

Justin Lehmilller:

... in that way.

Dave:

Okay, so I guess that dynamic's still happening, but when you look at the number of people with group sex or threesome fantasies, those almost by definition have some element of that in there. So people's fantasies don't necessarily match what they're saying, okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

Yeah, that's true, not just in sex, but everywhere in life. What we say and what we do are different things.

Dave:

As a psychologist, you just have to be a psychologist not a sex psychologist for that statement to be true. I hear you 100%. Now, you said something else in the book that I found interesting and I wasn't sure really what it meant. But it said, "In group sex fantasies, that the action is more important than the setting or the people." What does that really mean?

Justin Lehmiller:

What I mean by that is that, it's the idea, the activity, the fact that there is three people there, there's an extra body, other genitals that you can touch and see and explore. And new activities and things that you can do that you wouldn't be able to do with just one other person.

It doesn't matter as much who the other people are. It doesn't matter where it takes place, if it's your bedroom or anywhere else really. It's that activity that people are most drawn to, and when I look at the way people describe their threesome fantasies, they don't take anytime to describe where it takes place. Many of them describe their threesome partners in totally vague terms.

Like it doesn't matter who they are. Or like a lot of guys will write, me and two hot chicks, right? Doesn't matter who the women are, it's just they want, they're into the idea of a threesome.

Dave:

Yeah, I think it's a common fantasy certainly. I think everyone I know in college was like, "Wouldn't that be amazing?" How many people actually went through and did it and found out that it was more work than they thought it was, who really knows, right?

Justin Lehmiller:

Well I do know, but there aren't that many people who have had threesomes. If you look at nationally representative surveys in the US, about one in five men and one in 10 women say they've had a threesome before. If you break it down by sexual orientation, people who identify as gay or bisexual are much more likely to have threesomes than people who are heterosexual.

The reality is that, most people have fantasized about threesomes, but relatively few have ever actually done it. Threesomes are actually the fantasy that are least likely to turn out well when people go to act on it, because they do get into that situation and realize, "Hey, this is more work." Or, "Oh suddenly I'm jealous, I didn't realize how I would feel if my partner is getting attention from somebody else." Or, "Who's supposed to do what with whom and when, and what goes where?" It's just people don't have a script for it.

Dave:

I fully would agree with that. I go to Burning Man, I've been like six or seven times, I think it would have been seven times if they hadn't canceled it this year. I had one set of friends who are part of the, I don't

know the name of it, but the orgy dome camp. And so, if you have friends who are there, you're allowed to just go into the orgy dome without actually participating and just be like, "What is this all about?" Of course who wouldn't want to know what's going on here?

You commented about certain setting. Frankly, that's not a really nice setting, because it's dusty and sweaty and there's just been a lot of people in there. And I'm like, if I was going to do that, this is not where I would choose to do it. But yet, the attraction that there's hundreds of people waiting in line with their partners. This isn't just random hookups, these are people saying, "I want to be in the room with other people."

How much of that is threesome action versus voyeurism or exhibitionism, I don't really know, but maybe it's just my sample sizes where because I go to Burning Man. But it just feels like there's a bunch of people like, "I've never done this before, I want to try it. This is a place where no one's going to judge me. I'm in." It was a fascinating sight, let me put it that way. Do you go study festivals and places like that as part of what you do?

Justin Lehmiller:

I don't do a lot of observational work for the research that I do, but I do think there is value in going and trying to understand, what is it that people are actually doing? As part of my job sometimes, I do actually have to watch porn, because I need to understand how a certain sexual interest or fantasy typically plays out.

So for example, the first time I was writing an article about cuckolding, I didn't know much about it, so I had to go watch some cuckolding porn to figure out, what's typical in these sorts of scenarios? Yeah, sometimes we do need to go see what it is that people are actually doing to best understand the psychology behind that interest.

Dave:

What is the most common scenario there, that's one that seems pretty unusual? I guess what you're saying it's not unusual but it seems unusual, so what's the most common setup for that?

Justin Lehmiller:

For cuckolding, I actually find that a majority of men say they've fantasized about cuckolding before, so it's not uncommon, but it's pretty diverse in terms of what draws people to it. So for some men it really is about this compersion idea, where they want to see their partner satisfied or they get off on their partners pleasure.

But for other men it's really a BDSM kind of dynamic, where they take the submissive role and their partner's having sex with someone else. They might insult or humiliate the partner who is watching. For example, small penis humiliation is often a big part of this, where the female partner might say, "Oh look how much bigger his penis is than yours." She might use different terminology or language there, but you get the idea.

Sometimes there's themes of bondage involved, so I think it splits into two different camps of the people who are into partner pleasure and the people who are into BDSM. Then there's also a subset of people who really get a self-esteem boost from knowing that somebody else finds their partner attractive, because it reflects well on them.

Dave:

Okay, I get that. I will absolutely admit that when Lana and I go out and she's wearing really attractive clothing, it doesn't bother me if other guys look at her. I'm like, I have a really attractive wife and I'm very happy I have an attractive wife. I don't feel jealous because someone looked. I'm like although she's probably wearing that tight outfit for her own reason, so I don't hit the jealousy thing. But yeah, it feels to know that you are with someone who is wanted even if they're not available. I could totally do that, but you're saying more than half of guys have fantasied about that, okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

More than that, yeah. It's surprising.

Dave:

Okay, so that's way more common than I would have expected. You talked about BDSM there and there's two sides to it. There's the power play, the B&D side and then there's S&M, which is like getting off on causing or receiving pain, but yet they get grouped together. Did you in your study look at the differences between those two sides of it, and if so, which one's more common or how does that all work?

Justin Lehmiller:

Sure, so when you break it down, BDSM is enormously broad in terms of the activities that it comprises. But the most common elements are the dominance, submission elements.

Dave:

That's more about power than the S&M, okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

More so and when you look at the S&M component, the masochism component is much more common than the sadism component. That's true I believe regardless of gender that people are more likely to be turned on by the idea of having pain inflicted on them than they are to fantasize about inflicting pain on somebody else.

Dave:

Okay, that makes sense. At least I believe in basic human kindness, but then again, if you're into S&M, hitting someone or whatever the heck they like is actually being kind to them.

Justin Lehmiller:

You're giving them what they want.

Dave:

Yeah, it's such a way of messing with your head I can imagine. All right, so it's more power play, percentage wise 80%, power 20%, physical pain kind of stuff, it's that big of a difference?

Justin Lehmiller:

It's not that big, so when you look at whether people have ever had the fantasy, the dominance, submission numbers are really quite high. The sadism, masochism numbers are a bit more toward the middle, so it's not a massive disparity, but it's a sizable gap. But it's especially true if you divide out

sadism and masochism, sadism is much lower on the list than say dominance and submission and masochism is quite a bit higher.

Dave:

Okay, that makes sense. Now, in your book, you have some controversial stuff about saying there isn't really a gay brain or a straight brain, right? Tell me about that.

Justin Lehmler:

So this goes back to what I was saying earlier that, sexuality is so much more complex than we think that it is. There's more fluidity than people might realize or like to believe. So many of us like to believe that you're born with your sexual attractions and you can't control them and all these other things. I get that, because when you start to say that sexual attraction is controllable, then that opens the door to conversion therapy, which we know is harmful and-

Dave:

It doesn't seem to work very well.

Justin Lehmler:

... problematic on so many levels, and it just doesn't work. I think the way that I tend to think about sexual orientation is that, essentially you have two dials in the brain. One that controls attraction to men versus women, and it can be anywhere on that dial. It can be in the middle or slightly more to one side or the other, or totally to one side or the other. Then you also have the separate dial that it's just your general flexibility in terms of meeting your sexual needs. And so, it can be all the way down, all the way up, somewhere in the middle.

For somebody who is say exclusively attracted to women, so you have a man who's exclusively attracted to women, but he's very high on that sexual flexibility, he would be more willing and more apt to have sexual contact with a man if the opportunity presents itself. If he just has a drink or two and the opportunity is there, he's more inclined to go along with it. That doesn't change his fundamental underlying sexual orientation, but that might be why he's willing to have a same sex experience.

I think we need to look at our sexual orientation and just how flexible and adaptable we are in the situations we're in. How all of these things come together to make sexuality more complicated than we like to think. It doesn't fit into neat little boxes.

Dave:

Okay, I would completely agree with that just from observing the world around me. My grandmother who's 98 is a nuclear engineer by training, so a little bit on the Asperger side of things you might imagine. She's for years been fascinated by the research about the longer finger. If your ring finger's longer than your first finger and you're a woman, it meant you had more testosterone in the womb. She was interested in it from an engineering brain trying to explain why she liked math and engineering so much.

That's also been used as a common thing, there's genetic differences and a greater percentage of lesbians have that versus don't have that. No, I don't think my grandmother was a lesbian, she had seven kids. But is there any genetic basis that comes out of either research you've seen? I don't think your survey covered that, but does it look like there's something in the womb or something like that, anything that's identifiable that's predictive there?

Justin Lehmiller:

Yeah, there's a lot of research on where sexual orientation comes from, but what seems to be the case is that there isn't one theory that can explain all or even most instances of homosexuality. There is the research on the finger length ratios, which would suggest that there's something going on prenatally in terms of hormone exposure.

There's also research on what's called the fraternal birth order effect, which finds that the more older brothers a man has, the more likely he has to be gay. So with each success of older brother, it increases the odds of homosexuality. And again, that's also a thought to be related to something that's going on in the womb, where basically when a woman carries a male fetus, her body is exposed to things that it's never seen before. Basically it creates antibodies to them, and so then when there's a future male fetus developing, that can affect them in a way that might impact their sexual orientation.

There are also some studies finding that certain genes are related to homosexuality, but you also have the phenomenon of identical twins where sometimes one twin is gay and the other's straight. So it's not just as simple as like a gay gene, because if it were, then all identical twins should have the same orientation, but they don't. And so, again, what this tells us is that our understanding of the biology of sexual orientation is that, it's still very early on and there's still a lot we don't know.

Dave:

Okay, that a lot we don't know is the state of human affairs, and it seems like it always will be, but we're making great progress right now. I think your survey is great progress and just understanding what's really going on in there and via anonymity, I think you've done something really nice where people can talk about stuff that they wouldn't otherwise.

Now, in your book you talk about guides to discovering your own sexual fantasies. It seems obvious that, at least to me that well, what do you think about when you're masturbating? That would probably be the place to go to look. How hard is it to discover your own sexual fantasies?

Justin Lehmiller:

Well, I think part of it depends on, what do you think a sexual fantasy means? So I've talked to some people who say they don't have sexual fantasies. And when I started probing deeper and asking further questions, I discovered that they do. It's just that they tend to think that a fantasy has to be something that you've never done before, and that's really kinky or wild or extreme or something like that.

And so sometimes it's just a matter of different people have different understandings of what a fantasy is. But there's also some research finding that some people literally cannot have sexual fantasies. When I say sexual fantasy, I'm defining that specifically as a mental picture or image that turns you on. But it turns out there's some people who have what's called Aphantasia, where they literally cannot create mental imagery. And so, by that definition they can't have a sexual fantasy.

I've seen some informal surveys conducted online among people with Aphantasia, and it seems that their fantasies, the nature of them is very different from everybody else. Where, for example, they're very narrative driven or it's more about a feeling than it is about a picture or a scene.

Dave:

Okay, so they're driven to feel a certain way, but they don't know what's going to make them feel that way, so it's not really a fantasy if it's, "I want to feel whatever it is," okay. All right, so I guess that comes down to the way brains work, some people are visual, some people are auditory and whatever, okay. That's like deep wiring stuff, okay.

We've already talked about how to discuss it with your partner. One of the other things in your book is you're saying, well, some fantasies you might just want to keep as fantasies instead of going and acting them out. In my perspective I'm like, you probably should try everything you want to try when you're here. But I recognize that I'm an outlier there and there are some things where I'm probably not going to try that because I don't think that opportunity's ever going to arise. Plus hey, I'm married and there are things that are off the menu for me. So, how do you know if it's a good idea to go out and try something that's on your bucket list?

Justin Lehmiller:

It's important to recognize that fantasies don't always work out well when people go to act on them. But in my research I find that most of the time people say that the experience went well, and that they enjoyed themselves. It brought them closer to their partner, so there are benefits it seems to acting on your fantasies. But before you go that step of actually acting on them, you need to do a risk to reward ratio. You have to do the analysis for you.

Yeah, you can think of all these great rewards, like you're going to have a great orgasm and have fun and try something new and your arousal's going to be higher than it's ever been. You can do all these things, but there are risks. And so for example, if you're having a threesome or opening your relationship or cuckolding, maybe you'll feel jealous in that situation. Maybe you don't think you'll feel that now, but once you're actually in the situation, that's a different thing.

As a sexual psychologist, we know there's this thing called affective forecasting, where people try to imagine their feelings in a future situation. It turns out that people suck at predicting their future emotional states. For example, we tend to overestimate how good we're going to feel on a positive situation. You just can't take into account all of the variables and things that are going to change so what that means is, don't rush into it. Do that risk to reward analysis. Do some research and plan ahead, and make sure you have really good communication with your partner before you attempt acting on a very good adventuresome fantasy.

Dave:

It seems like it might be a good idea to have a relationship therapist engaged before you go off and do stuff like that. So that, that way if you break something, you have help fixing it, good advice, bad advice?

Justin Lehmiller:

Sometimes and this is actually an issue that a lot of therapists deal with is, you have partners with these unrealized desires who are coming in and trying to figure out, "Well, how do we make this work? Because he's really into this and I'm not totally on board." Sometimes a therapist can help because they can help you to craft a new scenario that's still going to tap into each of your wants and needs and desires that maybe you hadn't thought of before, but that has that mutuality that you can both be into.

They can give you the tools you need that really set yourself up for success because like I said, you need to have trust, intimacy, communication, all these things in place before you really make that leap.

Dave:

Do the work ahead of time is basically what you're saying?

Justin Lehmiller:

Yes, I'm saying, don't act on your fantasies to save a troubled relationship. Fix the relationship first, then act on the fantasies.

Dave:

That seems like you shouldn't even have to say it, but I guess people also say, "Oh have a baby, that'll fix things." Internally that doesn't work very well either, okay.

Justin Lehmiller:

Some people say, "Hey, we'll have a threesome and see if that fixes things," and the odds are, no, that's not going to work out well.

Dave:

Yeah, and it probably isn't. Well, okay, I'd love to finish our interview. You just talked about one aspect, but give me like two more top recommendations for people who want to talk with their partner. Well you hit on this a little bit earlier, but I really want the most important thing, either one or two things that either a man or a woman should do to talk to their partner. Like step one, step two. I'm asking you to tell me your entire book in two sentences.

Justin Lehmiller:

I don't know if I can condense it to two.

Dave:

Okay, you can have four, two main points.

Justin Lehmiller:

Step one, read the book, get yourself acceptance.

Dave:

I would double down on that, it's a really good book.

Justin Lehmiller:

You have to feel good about yourself before you can open yourself up to that vulnerability. Step two is, find a way to start the conversation, and a lot of people are used to talking about sex. For example, use technology to your advantage.

There are a couple of apps I love to recommend. One is called XConfessions, the other one is called Own Your Sex. They're both like Tinder for sexual fantasies, where you and your partner each download the app. You swipe right on the fantasies you're into, left on the ones that you aren't. Then the app compiles your shared interests, and so you can let the app do the work of figuring it out what you're both into.

Dave:

Right, I'm going to link to that, XConfessions and what was the other one?

Justin Lehmiller:

It's called Own Your Sex.

Dave:

Own Your Sex, what a fantastic idea, so you can just do that and if there isn't a match, your partner doesn't even know, right?

Justin Lehmiller:

Exactly, that's the beauty of it.

Dave:

Wow, that is so brilliant. I wish I had had that one when I was like 25, that would have been so much easier, because there's a huge amount of fear, oh sorry, huge amount of fear when you're just navigating that like, how do I ask for what I want. And I don't know, at least for me, eventually I'm very comfortable asking for what I want, and that's just how it is. But would that take 25 years, more than that of work to take it to that point, so okay.

Thank you for those pointers, I think that's fantastic. Your website Justin is [sexandpsychology.com](http://sexandpsychology.com) and for people listening to this show, I think there's great value in figuring out what your fantasies are. In my work, you know about the F words. You know fear is what biology does first. Food is what it does second and that third F word and I think we're already going to be explicit. Normally I just say fertility, but the third F word is fucking. All life forms do it in one way or another, and you put more of your energy towards these three things than anything else you do, including supporting your community which is the fourth F word.

So, you got to get on top of this one because if you spend all of your energy thinking about stuff you're never doing, you're probably wasting energy that you could put into the fourth F word or heck into the first one, whatever you decide. So that's why I think this matters for you.

Justin, your book is fantastic and I think you've done a great job of removing a lot of obstacles for people to just get that stuff out of their head and into the bedroom, so then they can act on it or not, so thank you.

Justin Lehmiller:

Well thank you, I always appreciate the opportunity to talk about fantasies. Hey, if you ever want to chat about it again, I'm happy to do it.

Dave:

I may have you back on the show. Do you have another book coming out anytime soon?

Justin Lehmiller:

Not anytime soon, but I have some other exciting projects in the works.

Dave:

Well anytime you're doing something new and interesting in further into understanding that third F word, I'm always game to talk about it. Thank you.

Justin Lehmiller:

Thank you.