

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION IN CASUAL AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Erika Evans

This lesson serves as an introduction for participants to explore various components of healthy communication with casual or romantic partners. Using Sexual Script Theory (*Simon & Gagnon, 1973*) and Communications Theory (*Fiske, 1990*), participants will engage in multiple activities that help them identify ways to empower themselves while making casual and/or romantic relationship choices.

KEYWORDS

Boundaries
Communication
Emotional
Intelligence
Gender Roles
Masculinity
Relationships
Sexual Health

THEME

Family &
Relationships

FORMAT

Workshop

TIME

105 minutes





PREPARATION

The facilitator(s) should use this section to prepare for the lesson.

PREPARATION

WHY THIS LESSON IS IMPORTANT FOR BLACK MEN

Healthy communication is a critical life skill for achieving several developmental markers, including achieving self-empowerment, engaging effectively in conflict resolution, fulfilling relationship goals, and succeeding with optimal sexual negotiation. For Black men, social scripts informed by toxic Black masculinity can be a strong deterrent to reaching these goals, putting them at greater risk for poor sexual health outcomes. This lesson provides the opportunity for participants to unpack and consider the reciprocal relationship between sexual scripting and communication. It is also an invitation to explore how cultivating one's communication skills can help one better articulate and achieve one's relationship needs and expectations.

GOAL

Participants will place increased value on using healthy communication to achieve relationship and sexual health goals.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Create a personal definition of healthy communication.
- Explain one benefit of establishing and evaluating one's own sexual script.

TIME

STEPS 1-4	Introductions and Opening Activity	20 min.
STEPS 5-8	Communication Discussion	20 min.
STEPS 9-12	Sexual Scripts Discussion	30 min.
STEPS 13-15	Sexual Scripts Deep Reflection	25 min.
STEPS 16-18	Closing Activity	10 min.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This lesson is written for 12 participants and one facilitator. While it can be adapted for smaller groups, it should not be used for groups larger than 15 participants. A second facilitator is encouraged for groups larger than eight participants.

REQUIRED BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR EDUCATORS

The ideal facilitator for this activity is a peer who reflects the identities of the men participating in the group (i.e., Black, Same gender attracted/loving, genderfluid, etc.), particularly someone who can effectively address emotional discomfort among participants. Additionally, having professional and/or personal awareness of specific ways that boundary confusion emerges in same-gender-loving relationships is strongly encouraged.

KEY TERMS

Sexual Script Theory (SST): a framework for understanding how people manage their ideas or beliefs regarding sexual experiences. According to this theory, people create norms regarding sexual behavior and these norms are expressed through the interactions they have.

Cultural scripts: The level of SST that extends from reflection on what one sees within one's overall developmental context, including overarching social expectations, representations made of sexual or erotic acts in films, and/or public service messages about sexuality or sexual practices.

Interpersonal scripts: The level of SST in which cultural messages directly inform one's norms and attitudes when interacting with others (i.e., sexual and/or relationship partners).

Intrapsychic scripts: The aspect of SST that focuses on the internal thoughts norms and expectations held within an individual about one's own sexual self and/or behavior. These scripts are considered instrumental in the development of a belief system, or a set of attitudes about one's own sexual being and the sexual "beingness" of others.

FACILITATION PREP

The facilitator(s) should complete the following tasks before the lesson starts:

- ❑ If space allows, arrange participant seating in a semi-circle facing the front of the room.
- ❑ On a sheet of flip chart paper, create two columns. In one column write “**Communication Strengths**” and in another write “**Communication Challenges**”. Place the sheet out of sight from participants until you are prepared to discuss it.

MATERIALS

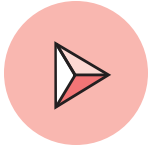
The facilitator(s) should have the following materials for the lesson:

- ❑ Permanent markers (*multiple colors*)
- ❑ Newsprint
- ❑ Printer paper (*two sheets for each participant*)
- ❑ 5”x7” notebooks (*one for each participant*) or loose-leaf paper (*three sheets per participant*)
- ❑ Writing utensils (*one for each participant*)

HANDOUTS

Each participant should be provided with the following printed materials:

- ❑ H1, “Unpacking Sexual Scripts”
- ❑ End-of-Session Evaluation



PROCEDURE

The facilitator(s) should follow the steps in this section to facilitate the session, and use the margin for notes and prompts.



Introductions and Opening Activity

STEP 1

Welcome participants to your session and conduct brief introductions with the group as needed. Review all established group agreements and reaffirm consent from the group. If group agreements have not been completed, please create them at this time (*use the Community Agreements lesson, if necessary*).

STEP 2

Give each participant one sheet of printer paper. Explain that, as an opening activity, you will be giving them instructions about how to manipulate their piece of paper. Explain that this activity is to be done with closed eyes. Instruct them not to ask any questions or talk to each other while directions are being read.

Alternate Activity:

If you have any participant who is sensitive about having their eyes fully closed, you may invite them to turn their back to the rest of the group, and work privately without seeing anyone else's activity.

STEP 3



Read the prompts from Facilitator Resource A, "Communication Origami." After all prompts have been read, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. "What happened during this activity?"
2. "Does everyone's origami look the same? What's different?"
3. "Everyone was given the same directions. Why do we have such a diverse set of origami results? What contributes to this diversity?"
4. "What was easy about this activity? What was hard?"
5. "Did anyone 'quit' listening? Why?"
6. "Sometimes when we communicate with someone, they may not receive the message we intended to send. Was one-way communication effective in this situation? Why or why not?"

7. “What can be a challenge of having a relationship or personal encounter based on one-way communication?”
8. “On the other hand, are there times in a relationship or encounter when one-way communication is necessary? If so, when?”

STEP 4

Conclude the activity by explaining to participants that when it comes to communication, individual perceptions vary. **Explain** that the message one person sends to another may not have been received or perceived in the way one intended. **Explain** that because folks have differing understandings about the same thing, it’s important to practice explicit communication, so that misunderstandings can be avoided.

**Communication Discussion****STEP 5**

By a show of hands, **ask** participants to share whether they have ever experienced miscommunication related to a sexual encounter or relationship. Without sharing explicit details, **invite** 2–3 volunteers to share their encounter, including any lessons they learned either about communication, or how they communicate. **Thank** each volunteer for sharing their story before moving on.

STEP 6

Reveal the sheet of newsprint titled “**Communication Strengths**” and “**Communication Challenges**” (see *Facilitation Prep*). **Invite** participants to think about how they personally communicate with others, either casually or romantically. Beginning with a volunteer, **invite** participants to share an aspect of their communication style that they would view as a strength, and one they would consider a challenge. (*Facilitators may choose to participate as well, particularly if doing so adds characteristics not previously noted by the group.*) **Record** each participant’s response under its respective list on the newsprint.

STEP 7

After all participants have responded to the initial question, ask the group to silently review each list. After 20–30 seconds, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What do you notice about this list? Any initial reactions, comments or questions?”
2. “Is there anything anyone else shared that was resonant for you, or unexpectedly challenging? Please explain.”
3. “Looking at both of these lists together, what’s one message someone could take about communication?”

STEP 8

Close out the conversation by encouraging participants to consider that many different factors can go into communication, and that while everyone has strengths, everyone also has room for growth and improvement.



Sexual Scripts Discussion

STEP 9

Distribute copies of Handout H1, “Unpacking Sexual Scripts.” Explain to participants that, in many cases, the way we communicate, including how we learn to communicate about sex, is a learned style. Explain to participants that these lessons can affect the norms we have about how sex encounters should proceed, even if they are not our preference. Finally, explain that as adults, it is always possible to change our norms and how they are communicated, by learning and practicing new skills.

STEP 10

Instruct participants to complete the top half of their Handout by writing 2–4 cultural statements or practices they remember seeing or hearing about sexuality or sexual communication, whether while growing up, or in the present day (e.g., “Sex is not something we talk about in this family.”). Explain to participants that these messages can come from any source deemed part of their culture, including family, friends, news sources, educational spaces, social media, etc. Encourage participants to work silently; explain that they will have time to discuss their answers once the whole handout has been completed. Give participants 3–5 minutes to complete the section.

STEP 11

After 3–5 minutes, **instruct** participants to move toward completing the bottom half of their Handout by writing 2–3 rules they believe exist about how one should behave sexually with others, even if they don’t live by them on a consistent basis (e.g., “Tops should always make the first move.”). **Remind** participants that these rules can be those they learned while growing up, or in the present day. **Give** participants 3–5 more minutes to complete the section, and then **proceed** through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “How did it feel to do this activity?”
2. “Were there any particular messages or habits that stood out to you while writing?” (*Invite 2–3 participants to share examples.*)
3. “Do you notice any links between the top half of your handout and the bottom half? Are there any overlaps you notice between what others have said and what you’ve written?” (*Invite 2–3 participants to share examples.*)
4. “Are there any messages you’ve written that impact how you see yourself or sexuality in the present, or how you’ve done so in the past? If so, how?”

STEP 12

Explain to participants that the Handout represents the Cultural and Interpersonal levels of “Sexual Script Theory”, a framework for understanding how people manage their ideas or beliefs about sex. (*If participants appear confused about what Sexual Script Theory is, read aloud the definition noted in the Key Terms section of the lesson.*) **Explain** to participants that they will now focus on the third level of SST, the “Intrapsychic level”, and use it to think more deeply about their own sexual scripts.



Sexual Scripts Deep Reflection

STEP 13

Distribute one notebook or three sheets of loose-leaf paper, and one writing utensil to each participant. **Explain** to participants that they will now be guided through a series of questions that they should respond to on paper. **Encourage** participants to be 100% honest with their responses and reassure them that they will not be expected to share anything they write with the larger group.

STEP 14

Proceed through each set of questions in Facilitator Resource B, “Intrapsychic Sexual Script Questions,” giving participants 3–4 minutes between each set to write. Encourage participants to avoid talking out loud or to other people while reflecting. Once all prompts have been read, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What was it like to complete this activity?”
2. “What came up for you while answering the questions?” (*Before asking this question, remind participants that they do not have to share any specific details about what they wrote if they do not wish.*)
3. “Were there any a-ha moments?”
4. “Connect your script to how you communicate. Are there aspects of your script that you feel comfortable communicating about with friends, partners, lovers or family? Are there aspects of your script that you have a tough time communicating?”
5. “What is one overarching lesson you’re taking away from this activity?”

STEP 15

Congratulate participants for the work they completed during this activity. Encourage participants to continue thinking about their answers after they return home, and to feel free to expand and adjust over time, as needed.



Closing Activity

STEP 16

Ask if anyone has any outstanding questions about the lesson. Respond to these as necessary. Distribute a copy of the End-of-Session Evaluation to each participant. Allow participants 5–7 minutes to complete the evaluation, and collect them as they are completed. After five minutes, invite any participants who have not completed the evaluation to do so after the next activity.

STEP 17

Close by asking each participant to name one thing they are glad to have learned in this session, and one thing they will continue to think about after they leave.

STEP 18

Once everyone has shared, thank the participants for participating and then adjourn the session.



FACILITATOR RESOURCE A

COMMUNICATION ORIGAMI

Directions: See **STEP 3.**

Read each step out loud for your group, one step at a time. Be sure to speak slowly and deliberately while reading each step; however, do not correct anyone on how they've performed the step you've asked them to complete.

- 1** Fold your sheet of paper in half.
- 2** Tear off the upper right corner.
- 3** Fold your paper in half again.
- 4** Tear off the lower right corner.
- 5** Fold your paper in half.
- 6** Tear off the upper left corner.
- 7** Fold in half a final time.
- 8** Tear off the lower left corner.
- 9** Unfold your paper and hold it up.
- 10** Open your eyes, look at your product and compare it with those around you.



FACILITATOR RESOURCE B

INTRAPSYCHIC SEXUAL SCRIPT QUESTIONS

Directions: See **STEP 14**.

Read each set of questions out loud for your group, one section at a time. Be sure to speak each question slowly and deliberately. Pause for 3–5 seconds between each question, and 3–5 minutes between each question set to allow participants time to reflect and respond.

Opening Reflection: What have I come to believe about how sex and sexual relationships should go? How do I feel about this sexual script? What, if anything, would I want to change about how I have sex and/or communicate my sexual desires?

What: What behaviors are or will become essential parts of my sexual life experience? What do I want to explore? What will I avoid or forbid? What of my behaviors, words, and thoughts should I consider to be sexual? Consider these questions in the context of different stages of your life and relationship. What will I do as a single person? In casual dating? In serious dating? In a serious partnership? In marriage, if I choose to do so?

Who: With whom will I share my sexual self? This question probably should be answered in general terms at first, perhaps becoming more specific as any relationships develop toward potential commitment. Consider characteristics of a potential partner, such as gender, age, education, personal goals, faith commitment, values and virtues, physical attributes, and so on.

When: When will various aspects of my sexual self be expressed? Consider this question not only in terms of stages of life and relationship, but also in terms of time of day, time of year, time of week, and time of month; and in terms of when to initiate sexual activity and respond to the advances of my partner.

Where: Consider general and specific locations, including any limitations, restrictions, and goals you may have. Include consideration of legal and practical factors affecting location.

How: With what enthusiasm and vigor will I approach sexual activity and interaction? Will I be initiator or responder or both? Will I compartmentalize sexuality or connect it to my entire life? How will I cope with the influences of my past experiences?

Purpose: What purposes will I try to meet with sexuality? Is it pleasure, power, intimacy, self-esteem or something else? Will some purposes be more important to me than others?

