

Sexually Transmitted Infections: An Evidence-Based Online Course

Module 6
Sexual health, human rights, and STIs

Dr Antonio Carlos Gerbase, STI Director, GFMER, Senior STI consultant, Former WHO staff member

agerbase@gmail.com

Module objectives - I

By the end of this module, learners will be able to explain sexuality and sexual health, apply rights-based and inclusive principles, identify major sexual health concerns, and describe how education and services support healthy, safe, and satisfying sexual lives across different ages and contexts.

Specific objectives

After completing the module, participants should be able to:

- Define sexuality and sexual health using a holistic, WHO-based framework.
- Explain WHO guiding principles for sexual health interventions, including rights, ethics, gender equality, and people-centred care.
- Describe how social determinants and human rights shape sexual health outcomes and access to services.
- Identify the key elements of sexual health, including healthy relationships, consent, well-being, inclusivity, and pleasure.

Module objectives - II

Specific objectives cont'd:

- Recognize common sexual health issues, including STIs, mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis, sexual dysfunction, unintended pregnancy, and unsafe abortion.
- Distinguish between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, and explain why these concepts matter in sexual health education.
- Describe the role of sex education and sexual health information services in prevention, empowerment, and informed decision-making.
- Explain contraception, family planning, and fertility in relation to reproductive autonomy and health.
- Assess the links between sexual health, mental health, emotional well-being, and relationship quality.
- Promote sexual diversity, inclusivity, and non-discriminatory practice in health and education settings.
- Explain the importance of sexual pleasure, satisfaction, and safe sex practices in effective sexual health promotion.
- Describe sexual health needs in older adults and how services should respond without age bias.
- Identify essential features of effective sexual health services, including accessibility, confidentiality, non-judgment, and rights-based care.

Module outline - I

1. Sexuality and sexual health definitions
   - Introduce sexuality as a broad part of human life and sexual health as a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality, not just the absence of disease.
2. WHO guiding principles
   - Cover the principles of human rights, gender equality, ethics, evidence-based practice, equity, and respect for autonomy in sexual health interventions.
3. Social determinants and human rights
   - Explain how education, income, gender norms, stigma, laws, and access to services affect sexual health and why rights-based approaches matter.
4. Healthy relationships and well-being
   - Focus on consent, communication, trust, respect, safety, and emotional support as key elements of healthy sexual relationships.
5. Sexual health issues
   - Address STIs, HIV and syphilis transmission from mother to child, sexual dysfunction, unintended pregnancy, and unsafe abortion as major public health concerns.

Module outline - II

6. Sex education and information services
   - Present comprehensive sex education and reliable information services as tools for prevention, informed choices, and healthier behaviours.
7. Gender, sex, and sexual orientation
   - Clarify the differences among biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and explain how misunderstanding these terms can lead to poor care or exclusion.
8. Contraception, fertility, and family planning
   - Explain contraception options, fertility awareness, and family planning as parts of reproductive autonomy and life planning.
9. Mental and emotional well-being
   - Show how sexual health and mental health influence one another through self-esteem, intimacy, stress, trauma, and relationship quality.

Module outline - III

11. Diversity, pleasure, and inclusivity
    - Include sexual diversity, sexual pleasure, satisfaction, and safe sex practices as legitimate and important dimensions of sexual health.
12. Older adults and sexual health
    - Highlight that sexuality remains relevant in later life and that older adults may face stigma, invisibility, and unmet health needs.
13. Sexual health services
    - Review how services should be accessible, confidential, respectful, culturally sensitive, and adapted to different life stages.

Sexuality

- A central aspect of the human being throughout life [that] includes sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.
- Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles, and relationships.
- Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.



An unidentified reproduction/adaptation after Bronzino's An Allegory with Venus and Cupid

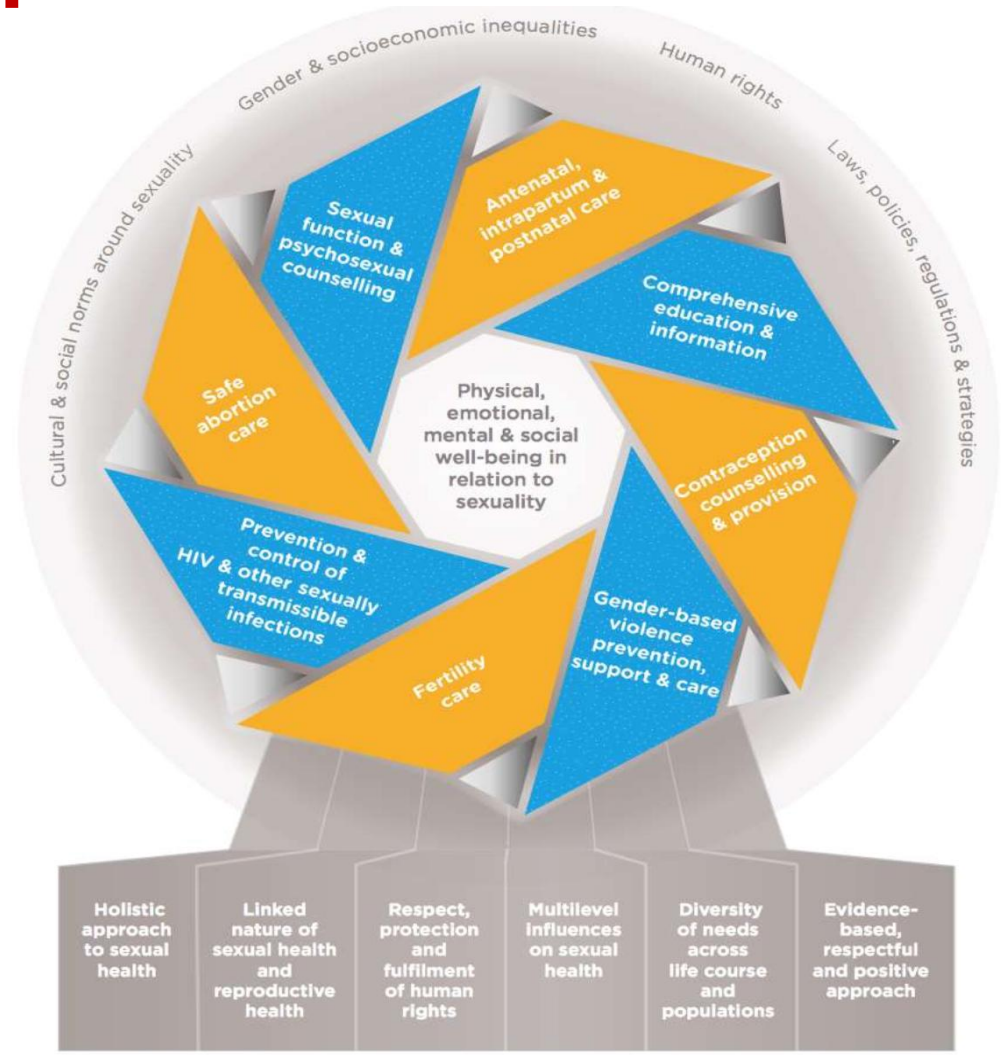
Sexual health

- Sexuality and sexual health are two closely related concepts that are fundamental to the overall health and well-being of populations.

- The WHO defines sexual health as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not simply the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.

WHO Framework for operationalizing sexual health and its linkages to reproductive health

- It is important for overall well-being.
- It is holistic in nature, encompassing physical, emotional, and social well-being
- It has many components



Sexual health and its linkages to reproductive health: an operational approach. WHO. 2017.

Guiding principles of sexual health interventions (WHO)

- Holistic approach to sexual health
- Nature of Sexual Health and Reproductive Health
- Respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights
- Multi-level influences on sexual health
- Diversity of needs across the course of life and populations
- Evidence-based, respectful and positive approach

Sexual health and its linkages to reproductive health: an operational approach. WHO. 2017.

Social determinants of sexual health

- Many interventions related to the social determinants of sexual health go beyond the scope of typical public health interventions and require collaborative and cross-sectoral policies, using a human rights framework.

There is a growing consensus that sexual health cannot be maintained or achieved without respect for and protection of certain human rights.



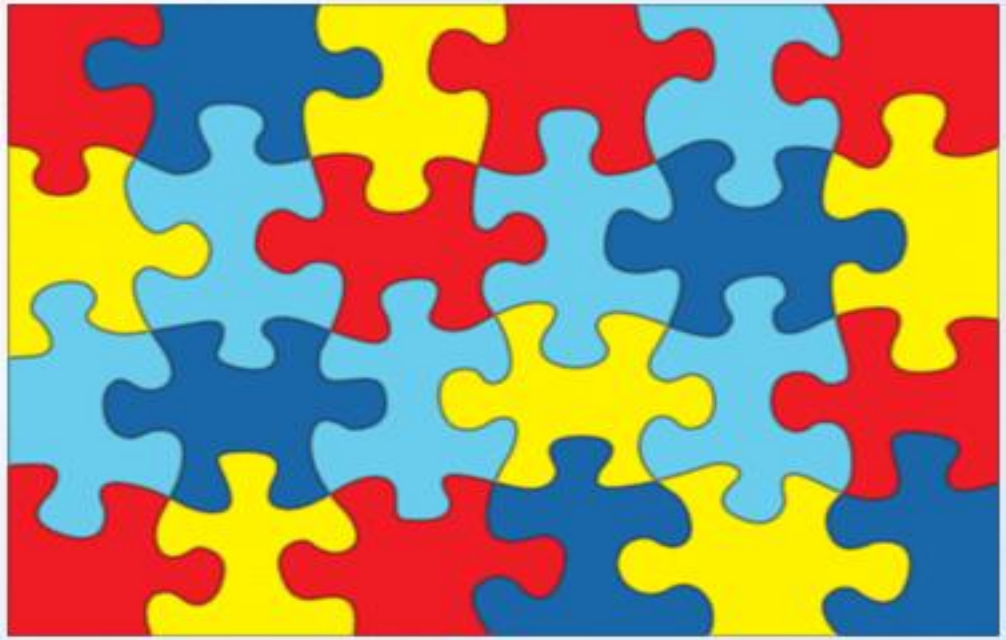
Fundamental human rights applicable to IMPROVING sexual reproductive health

- The right to life
- The right to privacy
- The right to consent to marriage and to have a family
- The right to the highest possible standard of health
- The right to information on health care

- be free from coercion and violence in relation to sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual behaviour.
- free choice as to sexual orientation, marital status and gender identity
- prohibit child/early marriages
- free consent to marriage, union or other similar relationships
- the highest possible level of health and well-being in relation to sexuality
- accurate and understandable information related to sexuality to promote young women's access to education and comprehensive sexuality education

Key elements of sexual health





Ref.: https://business.trustedshops.it/blog/inclusione-diversita-accessibilita-web-realta

Healthy relationships



https://mypsycho.it/category/come-vivere-relazioni-sane-e-appaganti/

Healthy relationships

- Communication, trust and mutual respect make the construction of healthy sexual relationships.
- We need to understand the dynamics of consensus and the importance of affirmative consent.
- Strategies to deal with and prevent intimate partner violence are critical.

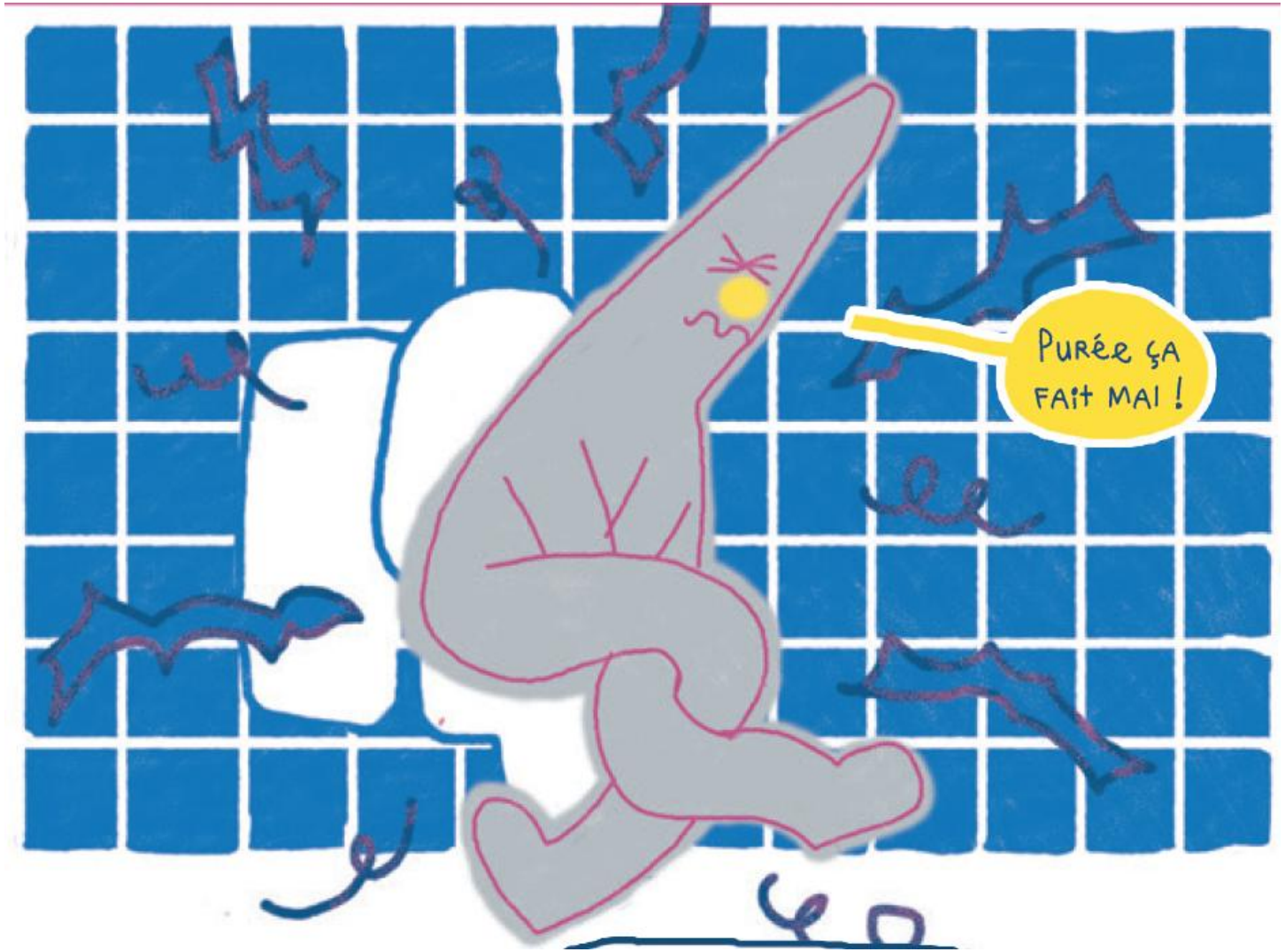
Sexual health issues



Image source: page 112 of "Poviesti, razskazy, legendy i shutki niemetskago sredneviekovía" (1922). https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/

- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis
- Sexual dysfunction
- Unintended pregnancy
- Unsafe abortion
- Sexuality-based violence

Sexually transmitted infections



While Cupid stole honey from the hive, the bee stung the thief on the finger.
And so we seek transitory and dangerous pleasures that mix with sadness and bring us pain

Cranach/Theocritus



Image source: Lucas Cranach the Elder, Cupid Complaining to Venus, c. 1526–7. Courtesy of the National Gallery, London. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/catalogues/foister-2024/cupid-complaining-to-venus

Sexual dysfunctions

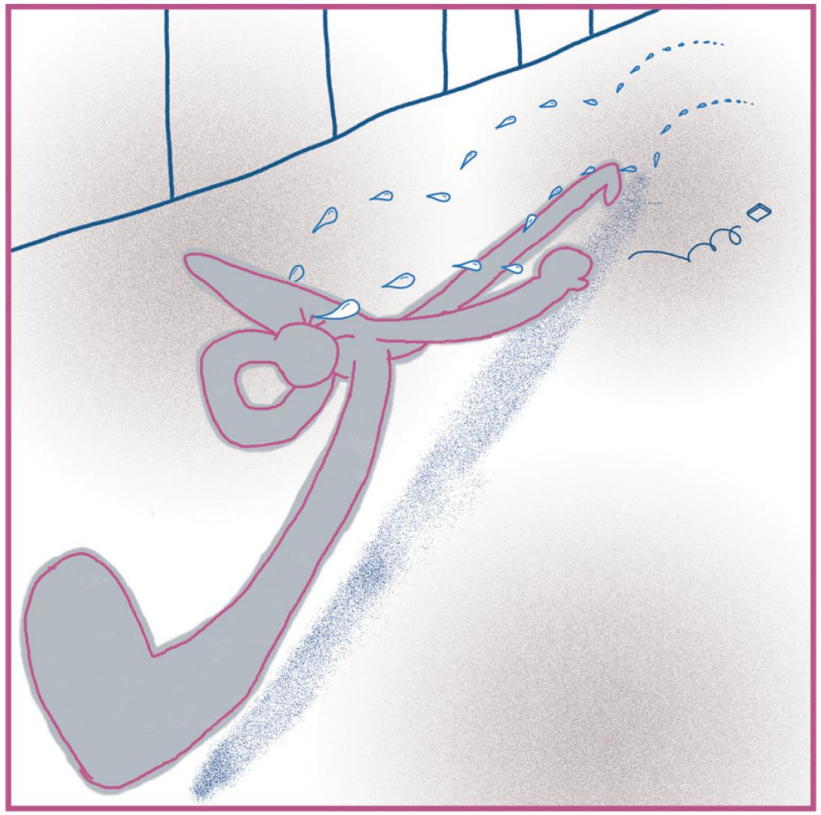
- Sexual dysfunctions are syndromes that encompass the various ways in which adults may have difficulty experiencing personally satisfying sexual activities.
- The impact of sexual dysfunction on public health has received very little attention.
- Estimates from a meta-analysis indicate that the prevalence of sexual dysfunction was 31% in men and 41% in women, with significant heterogeneity among the studies (Ramírez-Santos et al., 2024).



Image source: Antonio Gerbase

Sexual dysfunction: classification

- Sexual desire dysfunctions
- Hypoactive sexual desire dysfunction
- Dysfunctions of sexual arousal
- Dysfunction of female sexual arousal
- Male erectile dysfunction
- Dysfunctions of sexual arousal
- Female sexual arousal dysfunction:
- Sexual pain penetration disorder (SPPD)



Unintended pregnancy

- Reasons for the unmet need for contraception include:
  - limited choice of methods;
  - limited access to contraception, especially among young people, the poorest groups
  - of the populations, i.e. of unmarried people;
  - fear or experience of side effects;
  - cultural or religious opposition;
  - poor quality of available services;
  - prejudice between user and supplier;
  - gender-based barriers.
- Unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions in LMICs would drop by about one-third if all women with an unmet demand used modern contraception and all pregnant women received care that meets international standards (Guttmacher Institute, 2025).

Unsafe abortion - I

- According to WHO, unsafe abortion occurs when a pregnancy is terminated by people lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not comply with minimum medical standards, or both.
- Around 73 million induced abortions take place worldwide each year. Six out of 10 (61%) of all unintended pregnancies, and 3 out of 10 (29%) of all pregnancies, end in induced abortion.
- Around 45% of all induced abortions are unsafe. Of all unsafe abortions, one third were performed under the least safe conditions.
- Unsafe abortion is an important preventable cause of maternal deaths and morbidities. Women, including teens, with unwanted pregnancies resort to unsafe abortion when they cannot access it.

WHO, 2025

Unsafe abortion - II

Barriers to access to safe abortion include:

- Restrictive laws
- Poor availability of services
- High cost
- Stigmatization
- Conscientious objection of health care workers
- Unnecessary requirements such as mandatory waiting periods, mandatory counselling, third-party authorization, medically unnecessary testing

Sex education

- Comprehensive sex education covers topics such as puberty, reproductive health, contraception, and sexual diversity.
- Accurate sex education has an impact on reducing risky behaviours and unwanted pregnancies.

Sex education: components and approach

- Body composition and function
- Cognitions and emotions concerning sexuality
- Self-esteem
- Life and communication skills, including the right and ability to say "no"
- Relationships
- Gender and sexual diversity
- Violence, rape, sexual harassment
- Fertility, reproduction, contraception and termination of pregnancy (abortion)
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Safe sex and double protection (unwanted pregnancies and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases)
- Sexual and human rights

Holistic sexuality education should include information on the above topics: (EEGSE, 2016; Raitz, 2015; UNESCO, 2009; WHO, 2015; WHO and BZgA, 2010).

Sex education: types and contexts

- School programs (comprehensive sex education, abstinence-only or abstinence-centred education, abstinence-only programs until marriage)
- Delivered to the family
- Community Outreach
- Peer-Based Education
- Media-based education
- Telephone hotlines
- Media campaigns
- Media Advocacy
- Media literacy
- Brief communication related to sexuality (health professionals))

(AY, 2001; EEGSE, 2016; OMS, 2015; OMS e BZgA, 2010

Gender, sex and sexual orientation

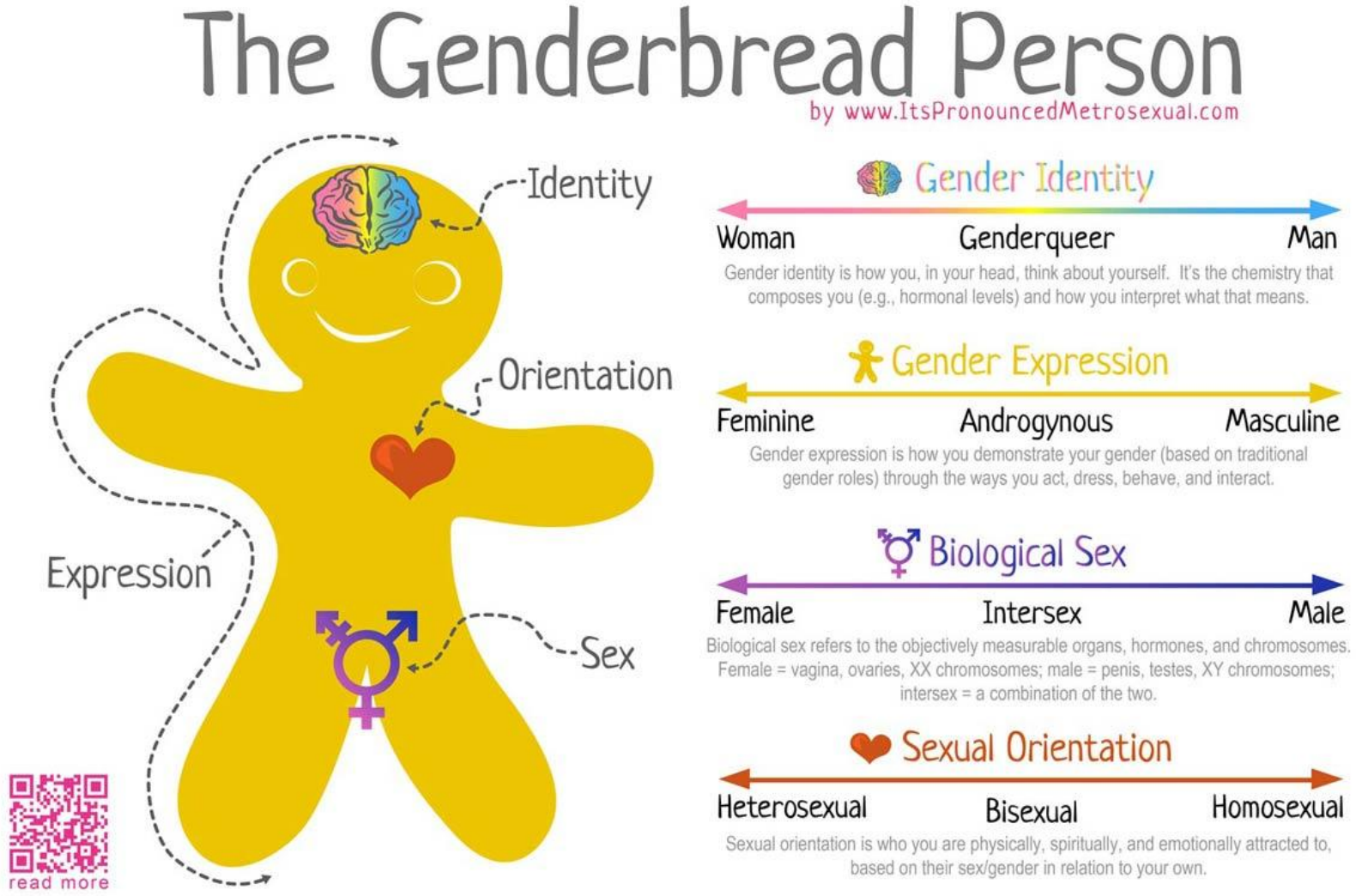


Image source: https://www.genderbread.org

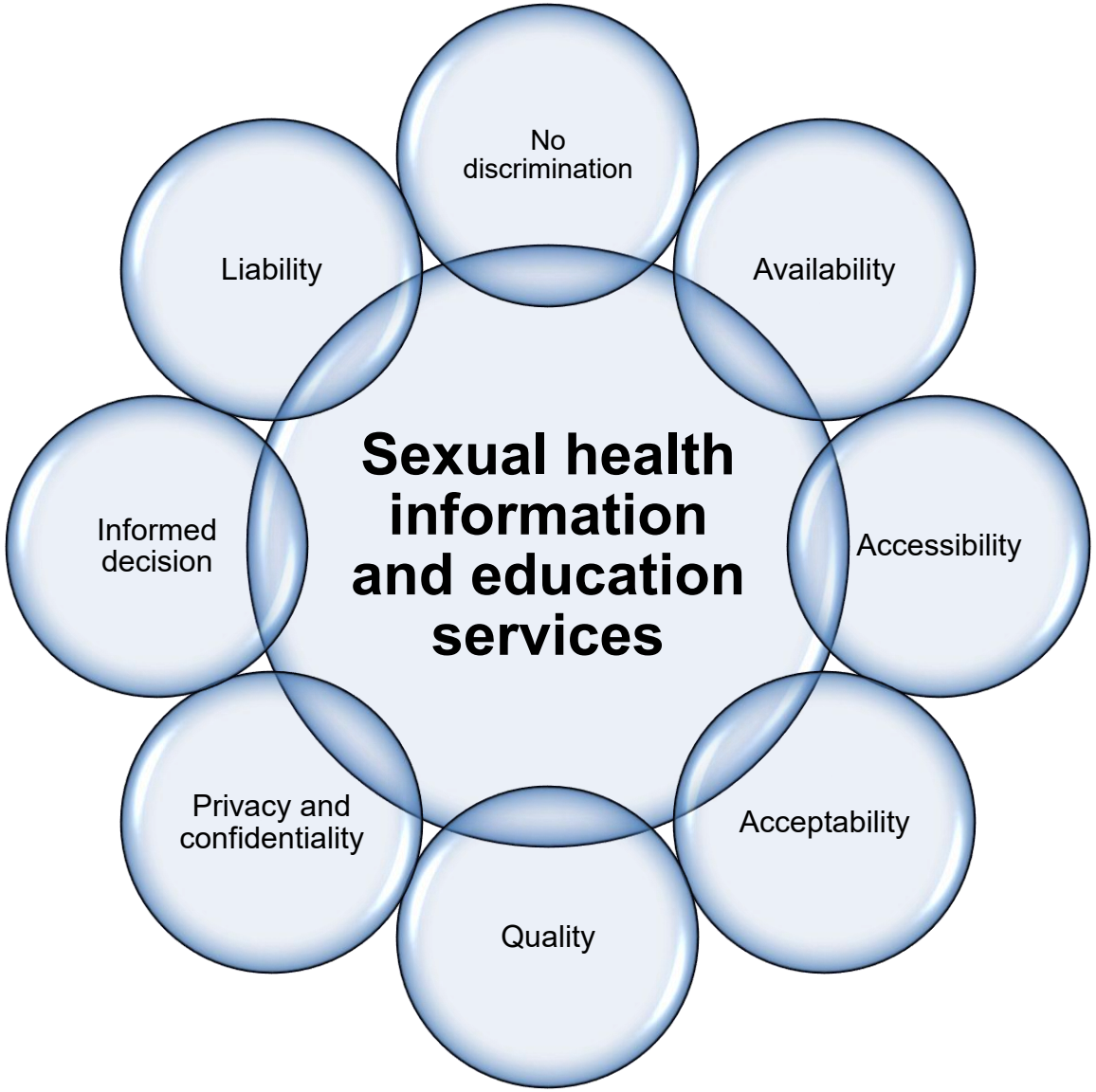
Gender, sex and sexual orientation

- **Gender identity** is a part of identity and answers the question "Who am I?", while **sexual orientation** is linked to the direction of desire and answers the question "Who do I like?", defining one's feeling heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.

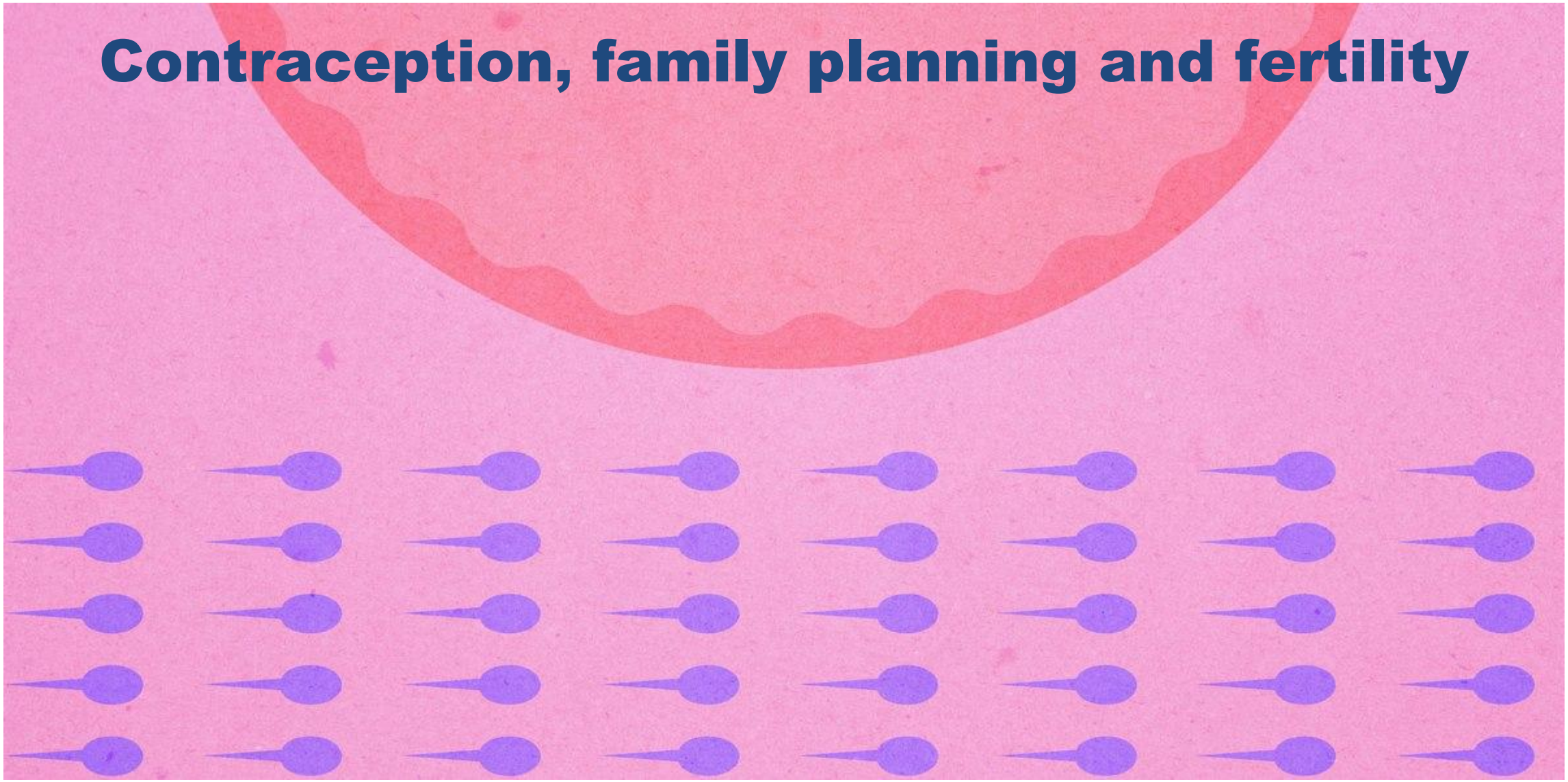
- **Biological sex**, i.e. the sex determined at birth, is defined on the basis of the anatomical, hormonal and genetic characteristics of the child and is divided into male, female or intersex.

Centro di Psicoterapia e Psicologia Clinica di Torino. https://www.centropsicoterapia.org/2022/05/11/identita-di-genere-e-orientamento-sessuale/#:~:text=Come%20psicoterapeuti%20psicologi%20a%20Torino,%3F%E2%80%9D%2C%20definendo%20il%20proprio%20sentirsi

Sexual health information and education services



Contraception, family planning and fertility

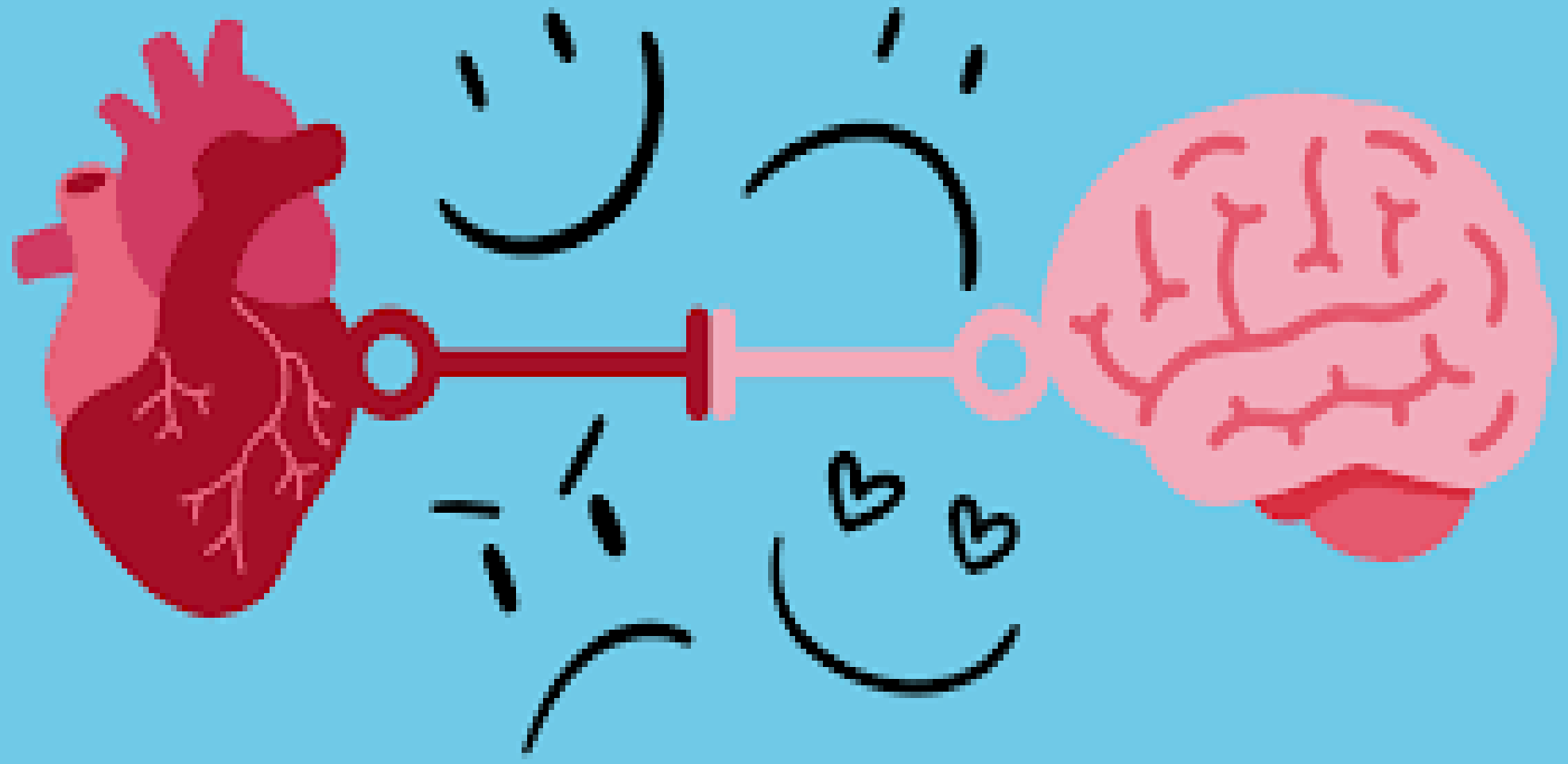


https://www.uaar.it/laicita/contraccezione/

Contraception, family planning and fertility

- Access to contraceptive methods, including barrier methods, hormonal options, long-acting reversible contraceptives, abortion.
- The importance of family planning and informed choice.
- Understanding the menstrual cycle, fertility awareness and reproductive health for all genders.
- Discussion on infertility and the options available for assisted reproduction.

Mental and emotional well-being



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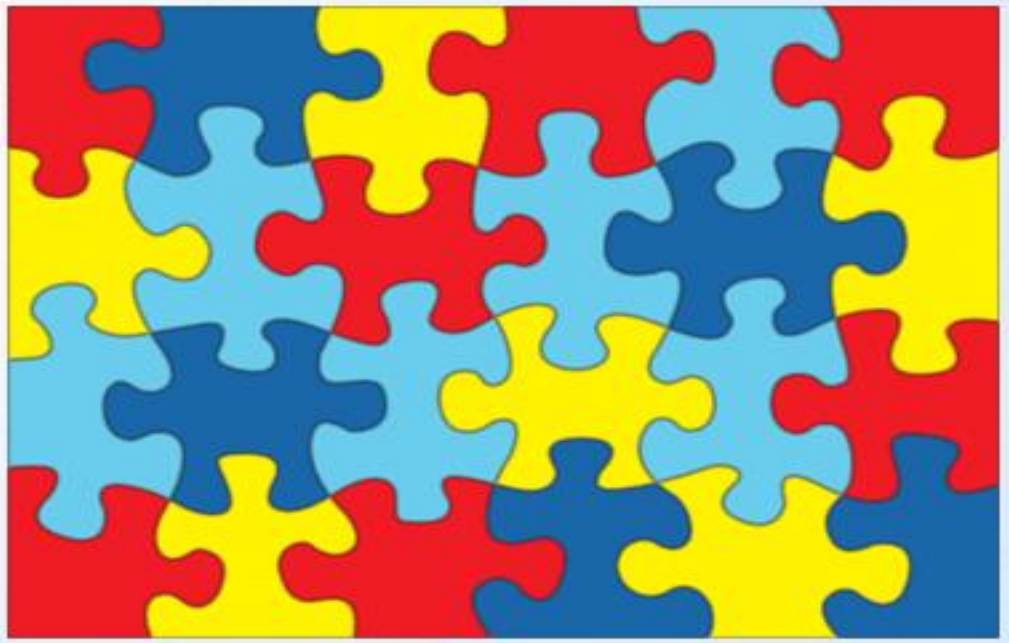
Mental and emotional well-being

- Address the psychological aspects of sexual health, including self-esteem, body image, and mental health.
- Strategies for dealing with sexual anxiety and maintaining a positive self-concept.

Sexual diversity and inclusivity





Ref.: https://business.trustedshops.it/blog/inclusione-diversita-accessibilita-web-realta

Sexual diversity and inclusivity

- Recognizing the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Promoting an inclusive and welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ people.

Sexual pleasure and satisfaction

Sexual pleasure and satisfaction

- Encourage open discussions about sexual pleasure, intimacy, and individual preferences.
- Explore the physical and emotional aspects of sexual satisfaction.

Safe sex practices



https://www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/resources/supporting-lgbtq-children-and-young-people-safer-online-browsing/

Safe sex practices

- Beyond sexually transmitted diseases, promote safe sexual practices to reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies.
- Strategies for dual protection: combining contraception and STI prevention.

Older adults and sexual health



- Addressing the sexual health of older adults and breaking stereotypes about aging and sexuality.
- The importance of health support for age-related sexual health issues.

https://www.cortivo.it/cortivoinforma/anziani/anziani-perche-sesso-migliora-salute/#gref

Sexual Health Services



https://www.oggitreviso.it/l%E2%80%99importanza-di-prendersi-cura-della-propria-salute-sessuale-270267

Basic sexual health services that the health system should provide - I

- Sexual health education and prevention information for young people, single adults and couples that offer confidentiality and privacy.
- Sexual counselling for the client's sexual health issues or needs, sexual orientation, and reproductive or contraceptive preferences.
- Identification and referral of victims of sexual and other violence.
- Voluntary counselling, testing, treatment, and follow-up for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Basic sexual health services that the health system should provide - II

- Diagnosis, screening, treatment and follow-up for RTIs, reproductive cancers and associated infertility.
- Diagnosis and referral for sexual dysfunction.
- Safe abortion within the limits allowed by law.
- Post-abortion care, including the provision of information, counseling and contraceptive methods.
- Services may be part of reproductive health services and other primary health care services, or they may be separate.



Dr.ssa Roberta Cacioppo https://www.psicoterapia-milano.it/risorse-storie/sessuologia/45-salute-sessuale

Key messages

- Sexual health is a positive, holistic part of overall health and well-being.
- Healthy sexuality depends on consent, respect, safety, and good relationships.
- Sexual health services and education should be rights-based, inclusive, and free from discrimination and violence.
- Prevention matters: STIs, unintended pregnancy, and unsafe abortion are major sexual health concerns.
- Sexual health should include pleasure, satisfaction, emotional well-being, and the needs of all people across the life course, including older adults

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Thank you

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