[intro music]

Elliot: Hello! And welcome back to the Sex, Drugs, & Self Care podcast. I’m your host Elliot, and today I am really excited to introduce you to Dr. Rose Grose.

Dr. Grose has a PhD in social psychology from UC Santa Cruz. She’s a faculty member in the department of community health education at UNC, which is part of the Colorado School of Public Health. Before coming to UNC, Dr. Grose was a Satcher Health Policy Leadership Fellow at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta. She’s currently teaching human sexuality in the human services department and several other classes in the Master’s in Public Health program. She’s also a mentor with the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center, and is part of the Comprehensive Sexual Education Alliance here in Northern Colorado. Over quarantine, she’s been bonding with her cat Cid, who is a good support animal and an excellent snuggler.

The topic of today’s episode is sexual health during the time of COVID-19. We are gonna get real comfortable, we’re gonna talk a lot about sex and masturbation, use some explicit language, so if you do not want to hear any of that, this is a great time for you to stop listening to the episode because you’re about to hear a lot of it. I also want to give you a quick heads up that towards the end of the episode, we are going to touch on some topics about intimate partner violence and sexual abuse. Nothing graphic, but just talking about it, talking about the fact that people might be experiencing more of it during COVID-19.

Alright. Enough listening to me gab by myself. Let’s bring in someone who knows what they’re talking about, here comes Dr. Grose.

[music fades, end of intro]

*Elliot: Thank you so much for sitting down and talking to me about this, Dr. Grose. I feel like this is a lot of stuff that I’ve been having questions about for sure.*

Dr. Grose: Yeah, it is a hot topic right now. Um, I think everyone wants to be as safe as you possibly can in the Bear community, so being educated is the first step. So I’m glad to be here, thanks for having me.

*E: Yeah, of course! So I feel like COVID is… we’re in a weird spot. It almost feels like we’re at the end of the tunnel, vaccines are coming out, but new strains are also coming out? In your opinion, do you feel like there’s a safe way for people to be dating or hooking up with people who aren’t in their household right now?*

DG: Yeah, that’s a great question. It does feel like we’re making some progress, but I would say safety wise we’re pretty much in the exact same place we were about a year ago. Um, and the short answer is no. (laughs). The short answer is no, all partnered sex poses some risk for COVID-19 right now, and so we always want to be thinking about that. At the same time, humans are sexual beings and, you know, we’re not trying to shame anyone for being lonely or feeling horny or feeling the need to sexual connection. And there’s ways to reduce the risk, and I’m sure that what we’ll be talking about today is how to reduce the risk, but it’s really important for people to know that all partnered sex has risk involved. It’s just about educating yourself on the risk and then making educated decisions about how much risk you’re going to take, right? Any sort of sexy time usually involves heavy breathing, being close to each other, it like almost by definition violates the six foot distance rule. So it’s especially dangerous if you’re having sex outside of your household and having sex with casual partners. So, yeah, no one likes to hear that answer, but it’s real talk. (laughing)

*E: Totally. It’s tough, but good to know. So, yeah, are there different risk levels associated with different asks, or how does that look?*

DG: Yeah, that’s a great question. Um, there’s definitely different risks involved and, you know, in public health, we think about harm reduction. And that’s really a philosophy that’s all about understanding that people are going to take risks in their lives. As educated adults, we do that. But there are ways to reduce the amount of harm you’re potentially exposing yourself to, and in this case exposing others to. So some activities are certainly, you know, safer than others. Really the only activity right now that is 100% COVID safe is sex with yourself. So that kind of goes on the safe end of the spectrum, um, and we can talk more about that. So that’s definitely my recommendation for people right now, is if you really want to be safe, that’s the way to do it as far as zero risk goes. That being said, most… a lot of people want to have partnered sex of some kind. So it really depends on how much face to face contact you’re having, how infectious that person is at the time, and what kind of precautions you might be taking. Um, so you know, it’s definitely safer to be having sex with somebody that’s already within your household, or COVID bubble, or pod, or whatever you want to call it. That’s the next, you know, the safest person. And then thinking outside of that, it’s definitely safest when

-you live alone and your partner lives alone, or partners, depending on what we’re talking about here

-when you’re both working from home, so you’re not having exposure to folks at work

-when you’re both avoiding other social situations and really

-when you’re only dating each other.

So any time you bring more people in the mix, you’re increasing your risk. So those are some things to think about. And then if you decide to have sex, the actual activities themselves also have varying levels of risk attached to that. So I don’t know if you want me to get into that right now, I can, but.

*E: Yes! I would love that, please.*

(laughter)

DG: Um, okay. Yeah, so you know, if you were to decide to have sex outside of your bubble, you’d definitely want to be negotiating all of those risks ahead of time. To me, that communication is like the first step for safety. So being educated, um, you know… I’ve kind of expanded my definition of consent these days, and consent does now really have to include, does everybody understand the COVID risks also, and are they making a really informed choice based on an accurate perception of those risks. So if you’re withholding any information, then that is not an informed consent situation, so *really* being clear about, you know, who are you seeing on a regular basis, who are they seeing on a regular basis, who do they live with, um, have they been tested recently? Maybe agree to both get tested before and have some conversations about timing. Conversations about symptoms, but we know that COVID spreads without any sort of symptoms being present, so that’s not the best way to kind of know if you’re being safe. So all of those discussions should be happening along with conversations about like, sexually transmitted infections and using condoms. To me, that all goes into the like, safer sex discussion now. It involves a lot more detail about your personal life. Um, so once you’ve decided, “Yes, this is safe,” then you can think about, “Well what kinds of activities do we want to do, what kinds of precautions are we willing to take?” And I would say if you do not agree on the precautions with a partner or partners, then don’t be having sex, right? Which goes with any sort of consent conversation, but it’s okay to say, “I’m not comfortable with that level of risk” and to decide not to participate in anything like that.

DG: Um, I want to go back one step before I get into like, the specific behaviors, and say – I tell this to my human sexuality students a lot, and it’s a little bit shocking to people, but the conversation also has to include conversation with who you live with. Like sex, it seems to be kind of a, it’s private, right? It might not be something you’re not comfortable or used to having conversations about, especially if you live with your family. (laughs) Um, maybe that’s not something you’re used to doing. But your interaction with anyone outside of your household is actually impacting the people that you live with and the risk that they’re now exposed to. So I always am saying, well now we have to have this conversation about who are you living with as well. Are they comfortable with you dating, are they comfortable with you bringing people over? What kind of risk are they willing to take? And you have to be willing to make some compromises there, really. Like if people in your household are in the high risk category for COVID, so they’ve got some sort of immune system issue or chronic illness or lung problems -- you can look at the CDC website to see what that means, high risk categories – um, but then you r*eally* wanna be extra cautious and have those conversations and make sure that everyone is aware of the risks involved.

DG: This is actually a really good example of non-sexual consent. (laughs) Um, in that consent is important in every type of relationship we have and doesn’t have to be sexual consent. But in this case, those kinds of conversations are so important because it’s, you know, it’s everyone’s responsibility to stop that community spread. So having those conversations might be awkward, but I think starting from the point of, you know, we’re all sexual beings, we all have needs and wants and desires, and how do we make sure that we’re getting those, you know, needs met in a safe way. Or how do we get them met in another way if we can’t figure out a way to agree to be safe? Um, so, those kinds of conversations absolutely should be happening. And I think we like to think, especially with family, that sex is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” situation, and I would say that your business now is everyone else’s business. Not the details, you don’t have to tell them the details! (laughs) But it’s their business now if you live with them and you’re part of that safety, you know, pod, bubble, circle, whatever, those conversations need to happen before you get into what types of behaviors you might do.

*E: Totally. Before we jump into, like, specific behaviors and stuff, that is so tough! Because sex is such a hard thing to talk about already, and suddenly all these new layers is really, yeah, it’s complicated. And I guess I’m wondering if you have any advice for people who are having those hard conversations with, like, potential partners and also friends and roommates who they might not be that close with, stuff like that. Do you have any advice?*

DG: Yeah, I mean, just, I would just acknowledge the discomfort from the beginning. I think putting it out there and airing that helps break the ice a bit. Just acknowledging that, “this might not be something we would usually talk about, but we’re not in a normal situation.” I think presenting it that way, you know, “these are unusual times, unprecedented times” – (laughs) I’m sick of hearing that phrase, but it’s true – starting out with that. And I think before even getting into any conversation with a partner, with someone you live with, you really want to have a deep look at what are your boundaries, what is the safety level you’re willing to take, and have that heart to heart with yourself. You know, if people want to reach out to me via my email, I actually created what I’m calling a “Sexy Bear Safety Plan” for the orientation program at UNC, and that is just you know, kind of a really detailed, like, what risks are you willing to take, how comfortable are you with these types of conversations, just a self-assessment of like, where are you right now, before you have a conversation with someone else. Knowing what your boundaries are is so important, that way if somebody questions them, you’re like, “Nope, this is where I’m at. This is what I need, and if that doesn’t work for everybody involved, then we have to move on from there.” But you know, I find that when people are unsure or maybe wishy-washy going into the conversation, that’s more likely to have them feel like, “Oh, I wasn’t really heard,” or maybe I feel taken advantage of in that situation where somebody was able to say, “Oh your boundaries don’t really matter” or “ it’s not that risky.” Especially with the misinformation around COVID right now, it’s so easy for someone to try and say, I don’t know, “Well we don’t need to take those precautions.” So knowing where you stand is so important in any of those conversations. And making sure that you’re treating other people how you wanna be treated! I mean, pretty basic ethics stuff. But you know, don’t slut shame them if you don’t want to be slut shamed, right? So treating their relationships as as important as yours.

DG: And I think, again, you don’t have to get into the detail of the sexy times that you’re planning or wanting to have, you can just have this conversation about hugging and it’s pretty much the same conversation. Right? Because that, unfortunately, is risky when you’re within 6 feet of each other. So you could almost take sex completely out of the conversation and say, “okay, who are we willing to be interacting with, when, how?” as far as the housemate conversation or family conversation goes. Right? If I wanted to go and snuggle with someone, what would it take for us to feel comfortable with that situation? You don’t have to talk about all of the other things you’re going to do. (laughs)

*E: Totally. Yeah, that is so true. Cool! So… yeah, let’s just get into it I guess. What’s the deal with actually having sex during COVID?*

DG: Yeah! So if you’ve gone through the risk assessment if you will, and decided with a partner that you’re willing to take those risks, you’ve talked about testing, you’ve been tested hopefully, there’s a few things that even when you’re having sex – and when I say sex, I’m talking about all kinds of sexual behaviors, that term doesn’t mean just penis-vagina intercourse of “heterosexual sex,” you know, any type of sexual behavior – so when you get down to that, there’s actually things you can do to choose behaviors that reduce the risk of COVID. So when we think of COVID risks, we know that anything involving saliva, involving mucus, involving breath, those are going to be problems. So how do we reduce the amount of airflow going on? Well, a couple different things that we can do. We can be masked up, I’ve heard this called “mutual masking” (laughs). Um, so, it seems kind of weird to think about, like, why would I have sex with a mask on? Well, that is going to reduce the amount of breath happening. Why do we use them in general? Because they’re proven to work. So you can translate that into the bedroom as well, or wherever you’re having sex. So that’s something to think about, I know it makes people a little uncomfortable and it feels a little unsexy, but honestly the kissing is actually like the riskiest behavior now, (laughs) or one of them, right? So that might be a nice reminder of like, “Oh, I can’t smooch this person, I have a mask on.” Um, something to think about.

DG: Or you can decide to do activities that are actually further distanced away! So mutual masturbation, so that’s when you masturbate, your partner masturbates, but you’re doing that, you could now expand the distance and do that from across the room rather than right up close to each other. You can choose sex positions that aren’t as face to face, so we don’t need to get into the details on here, I’m sure people are well aware of what some of those are. But basically choosing positions where you’re not facing each other can actually reduce the risk. Opening the windows! Little bit tricky right now with this time of year, but opening the windows, getting airflow and circulation going. Making it a quickie so it’s less exposure time! All of those things are going to reduce the risk. And always, always wanting to use barriers. Because right now with the way that we’re learning about COVID, we do not know if it’s sexually transmitted. It’s kind of hard to disentangle those things, because usually the sex involves breath of some kind. (laughs) So we just don’t know, we don’t know if it’s spread through seminal fluid or vaginal fluid. We do know that feces are a way to transmit COVID, so really any kind of sexual activity you’re having, you want to make sure you’re using condoms, dental dams, other barriers like that. And honestly I would say kind of avoiding a lot of the anal activities you might be doing because the feces presents actually increased risk. So that’s kind of getting into the nitty gritty detail here, but you know, something to think about for folks.

DG: And then, the other safety thing is, you know, washing your hands. Hopefully you’re doing that before sex anyway (laughs) but especially in quarantine where we keep talking about washing your hands for 20 seconds or more. Um, doing this before and after sex, making sure that you’re washing any sex toys you use, any of the surfaces, especially if it’s something that like a housemate might potentially come into contact with later. And then after sex is really important too, um, you know, because people could have exposed you and not have any symptoms and you don’t know, the best thing to do is assume you’ve been exposed. I mean, that’s true for daily life right now, unfortunately. Assume you’ve been exposed and act accordingly. So monitoring your symptoms, maybe reducing your contact with other people after you’ve been having sex with someone new, and getting tested as regularly as you can. So those are a few things if you’ve chosen, “Yes, I physically need to have some sort of sexual intimacy, we’ve had these conversations, everyone involved is consenting to this, but let’s maybe choose some of these to make it even safer.”

*E: That’s great. So, yeah, let’s say you do the risk assessment, you think about all the stuff, and you decide that maybe you don’t want to be having in person sex. What would you recommend to people who are maybe choosing to abstain from that for the first time in a while and are not sure what to do? Like, how can people keep a healthy and satisfying sexual life without taking those risks?*

DG: Absolutely. You know, first I would just applaud them right? For making that risk assessment, taking care of themselves. I always recommend solo sex and self-exploration at this time, to anybody. As I mentioned at the beginning, the only sex that is zero risk right now is sex with yourself, and a lot of people don’t even think that that’s real sex. And I would say, challenge that assumption! Because, really, this is a great time to focus in on that self care, and masturbation and exploring yourself is absolutely part of self care. And as an authentic and independent adult, I think it’s so important to figure out how to rely on yourself for your own needs and wants and not have to depend on someone else to get those needs met. So this is a good time to practice some of that, it’s easier said than done sometimes, but this is a great time to see if you can learn how to rely on yourself for your sexual and emotional needs. Like, do you really need a partner right now? What is it specifically for? Find out what you’re needing, and really sitting in that. Is it a sexual release, is it physical touch, is it conversation and relationship on a deeper level? How do you get some of those different connections without risking your health? It might depend and really vary depending on what those actual needs are when you sit down with it. Like, is it sex that I really need, or like, do I really just need someone to listen to me? (laughs) Those are kind of, you know, sometimes they get a little bit mixed up. So taking that time to figure yourself out.

DG: It’s such a good excuse too! Like, maybe you haven’t had a chance to do that before, maybe you’ve felt pressure from, I don’t know, your social circle to have sex, or just society in general, norms. So maybe you can say, “Actually, during this pandemic, I’m gonna be abstinent on purpose, and I’m just going to have sex with myself, so I can really discover what I enjoy.” So you know, we know that there’s a lot of health benefits to masturbation: it reduces your stress, helps you sleep, boosts your confidence, strengthens your immune system, all of these good things that are ultimately going to help you through the pandemic. You know, mental health and emotional health, those are things you can kind of wrap up with this exploration of your own body, exploration of your sexuality. Um, so those are just a few things. Just like, give yourself permission to take the time to do that. As far as how to make that more interesting, you know, you can pursue things like new sex toys. A lot of those are really cheap at the beginner level, and you could try something that maybe you haven’t tried before. You could try writing or reading erotica in a way you haven’t done before. If you’re looking at pornography, pay for it, please! (laughs) Um, but people are finding all sorts of ways to explore their own sexuality. And the only real safety tips I have for that are, you know, making sure that you’re washing your hands before and after, and that you’re washing your sex toys and any electronic device you might be using to make sure that you’re not inadvertently spreading something to someone else.

DG: So those are all the solo sex things to think about, but if you are deciding not to take risks by being in person, you can still have partnered sexual interactions, they just might look different than we’re used to. So there are quite a few things you can do still maintaining that six foot distance and to have some intimacy. And to get creative with it, and try not to see it as some sort of sacrifice or something that’s not as good as the alternative, but an opportunity to get to know each other a little bit better. So some of the things I’m thinking about are, you know, having more phone sex. Sometimes that sounds like, “ugh, that’s just not as good, I don’t really want to be on the phone,” but it’s actually a great opportunity to talk about what you like and explore your fantasies with a partner, you know, in a relatively safe way. I mentioned mutual masturbation before, so staying six feet away but being in the same room, being distanced, you can do things like that. Sexting can also be fun! You know, certainly you wanna think about how to make sure that you have consent before anything like that; before you just send a sexy note to somebody, make sure that they’re okay with it. Um, video chatting, some people are doing more and more of that. I would say you always wanna be careful about digital --- or, let me rephrase that, virtual sex – every time I say “digital sex,” I’m like, “wait, that’s the word for fingers!”

(laughter)

DG: But *virtual* sex, you want to make sure that you are comfortable with it and totally on board because it’s really never 100% guaranteed that those images or sexts might not make it into the hands of someone else. So you wanna make sure that any time you’re thinking about videos or pictures that, actually, you’d be okay if it ended up on the internet somewhere, because it could. Um, so something to think about. And of course, never sexting or sending nudes with someone who’s under 18, that’s like, the REALLY big thing there. But so, video chats, sexting, you know, now they have technology where they have Bluetooth enabled sex toys! So you can have fun times with your partner at a distance and they can actually use an app and control some of the modes of the sex toy that you’re using. So you can have these really intimate experiences even from a distance. So, you know, technology is amazing. (laughs) So you can look into that. They are not the cheapest sex toys, they are on the pricier side, but something to think about. And then the other thing that I’ve read and I really like is just sharing fantasies with each other and talking more about sex. Sometimes I think people jump into doing things without having the conversations, and those conversations can be super hot. So talking about the sex you had in the past, talking about the sex you want to have in the future, reading sexy stories to each other, writing sexy stories to each other. Even like, swapping a playlist that’s your sexy songs, writing love letters, like getting kinda creative with how to talk about and really reflect on your own sexuality with another person potentially, I would like to think, is going to enhance the sex you’ll eventually have with each other. Right? You’ll have a better idea of who they are and what they like and what you like, and it’s good practice to verbalize some of those things out loud.

*E: Totally. Yeah, that’s so interesting. It’s so many complications and it’s so many things to stress about, and also it’s kind of, I don’t know, giving people opportunities to, like, try new things and put in more effort. And I think it can be kind of romantic in a way, honestly.*

DG: Oh yeah! I totally agree. I think it does take a little more thought process and a little more negotiation of like, what are you interested in doing as a safety precaution versus your partner, can we come to an agreement, but, I don’t know. They don’t have to be awkward conversations. I think we might have the perception that that’s gonna be the case, but when we’re talking about what turns us on, those conversations can then become sexy conversations, I think. That’s an opportunity to learn how to express yourself, and communication with a partner is only going to be a good thing, I think.

*E: Absolutely. Ok, so back tracking a little bit, I had another question about, um, solo sex for people who are maybe exploring that for the first time. I feel like college is kind of, even without COVID, the time where a lot of people figure this stuff out for the first time. And there are just so many different things out there, it can be kind of hard to like, know where to start if you’ve never done any of that self exploration and stuff. Are there any resources or anything you would recommend for people who are maybe figuring out like, “Okay, I need to figure out how to rely on myself for sexual pleasure for the first time.”*

DG: That’s a great question, I did not come prepared with masturbation resources.

(laughter)

*E: That is okay!*

DG: So let me think about it for a second here. Um, I mean the internet is an amazing place, right? You do have to have a critical eye to what is a good resource, but there are a ton of great resources out there that are awesome places to start. One I would – it’s kind of aimed to a slightly younger crowd, but I think it’s still completely relevant for college students because, like you said, this might be the first time they’ve ever been thinking about this stuff – it’s called scarleteen.

*E: Mmhmm! Yeah I’ve seen that, it’s incredible.*

DG: Yeah, I mean they have tons and tons and tons of resources. It’s really by young people for young people, but they also have experts that, you know, verify and check the information. Um, so I mean, they cover all sex topics, not just masturbation. But I’m sure they have, like, a very specific blog that answers that exact question better than I could briefly here. So I would say, you know, reaching out to different sources on the internet, just taking time to spend time with yourself and to take the pressure off any sort of outcome. I think sometimes people get stressed out about masturbation when they think that they have to have an orgasm, or they have to feel a certain way, or there’s only a couple different ways that they think it’s okay to masturbate. And it’s tricky because in our society, we don’t really talk about masturbation. It’s pretty taboo, you know, we don’t learn about it in sex ed, so I would say the more you can release yourself from those expectations and assumptions of what’s gonna happen, and just *let it happen*, and just take an explorative, I don’t know, perspective on it. And give yourself the freedom to have nothing happen, or maybe you have the best orgasm of your entire life! Who knows? Um, you might discover something about yourself that you can then translate into partnered sex later. I don’t want to make an assumption, but I’m going to say you probably will discover things about yourself that you can translate into partnered sex later if that’s what you want. And some people don’t wanna have any partnered sex, ever, right? That’s something to also think about. So that, you know, this time might actually be very freeing for them. There isn’t a pressure to do that, they can take time for themselves, um, you know, and be with themselves as a sexual person. You don’t have to have a partner to be a sexual person. So I would say take your time, slow it down, make sure that you’re creating an environment around you where you don’t feel like you’re gonna be interrupted, that you have lots of time, that you can just take it as it goes and again take the pressure off of having there be a certain outcome that you’re looking for. And just maybe approach it as a learning experience!

*E: Yeah, definitely! It’s so complicated how there’s so much pressure on both ways. It’s like, “oh, you should be masturbating and you should be having the best orgasms of your life if you wanna be really, like, empowered” and also, like, so many messages from the opposite side and everywhere in between. It’s hard to figure that stuff out by yourself.*

DG: Absolutely. I think you’re right on, that that pressure can kind of go either way. So yeah, taking time to figure out well, what does it mean to you to be able to be empowered and take control over your own sexuality? Like I talked a little bit before, like, how can we learn to rely on ourself for our own sexual needs? I think masturbation is one of the best ways to think about how to do that. You take a huge load of pressure off if you can give yourself an orgasm and you don’t have to depend on someone else to do this for you, that you can take it into your own hands if you will. So, but, you’re right, not everyone is going to want to, and that’s fine! That’s totally cool too. You know, I will always be on the masturbation soapbox, that this is an awesome thing, but it isn’t for everybody. It’s not for everybody, and you know, maybe it’s not for you right now and it is at a different time. And there’s also other types of issues that come into this that often don’t get talked about, like disability and whether or not you even can physically do that or not. Um, so there are different adaptations for sex toys and things, that kind of make extensions so that you can reach your body and your genitals if you do have some sort of physical limitation. Um, people who have body image issues are really uncomfortable with the idea of kind of being alone with their body or learning more about their body, because there’s a lot of shame or anxiety wrapped up with how they feel they appear. Which I think masturbation is great for, because you don’t have anyone else watching! (laughs) There’s no one else viewing you, so you can take some of that pressure off. But it’s something to think about, or you know, folks who are experiencing gender dysphoria or other issues related to their gender identity, sometimes this isn’t necessarily the most empowering thing. That’s kind of getting into the more complicated side of human sexuality, but it’s something to think about, right, when we’re giving advice about safety, “oh, masturbation is the answer to everything.” It isn’t necessarily for everyone! But I still think it’s like, the best COVID safety precaution we can take. So, worth a shot! You know, you might not like it, but worth a shot.

*E: Yeah, absolutely. Also small plug to listeners, that scarleteen thing we mentioned earlier, they do have a ton of really good resources about ability and gender inclusivity, and navigating consent with things like, maybe if somebody goes nonverbal, things like that. Really really important. Okay, um… so, this might totally not be in your wheelhouse, and if you don’t have an answer it’s okay, we’ll just cut this bit out. But if people are exploring things like sexting and video chatting and stuff like that, even maybe just like, having concerns about safety and privacy when like, putting in a card to pay for porn. Do you have, do you know anything about sort of the basic precautions people can take for things like that?*

DG: Yeah, the part about putting in a card for porn, I’m not 100% sure for, because I do want to advocate that people pay for their porn. Um, so, yeah that might, if you share like a debit card account with your family or you’re not the full owner of your credit card, maybe you don’t wanna do that. Usually though, usually – and I, again, not 100% -- but usually sex toy stores, porn shops, different things where you’re purchasing things, they have taken this into account and they are respecting privacy. So if you get a sex toy delivered to your house, it’s not in a big box that says, “THIS IS A SEX TOYYY!” (laughing) Right? You know, they’re packaged in a way that’s not going to display that to all of your neighbors when it shows up at your door. Same thing with porn. So they more than likely are not going to show up on a credit card statement as something much more benign and generic. So the name of the company is not like, Sex-X-X-X-X.

(laughter)

DG: Um, it’s you know, depending on where it is. And you might choose specific retailers because of the way they talk about privacy. So it’s always a good thing to look at a website and say, okay, is this sex toy store online, and to take those things into account when they ship this, or is it something more like, a… Cause, you know, you can get sex toys on Amazon and from Walmart and from all these other places, that might be the more economic choice, but it might not be the choice that protects your privacy as much as you want. Same thing goes for porn sources. So there are ethical porn sources that are gonna take more time to think those things through and also communicate that on their website. So you know, it might be worth taking some more time if this is a concern for you, to really look at finding a source for you that has considered those things.

DG: As far as other kind of virtual sex precautions, you know, it’s always a great idea, again with the communication. I know I’ve said it a lot, but it’s so important! Talking with whoever you’re engaging with and making sure you have a safety protocol in place, right? Like, what are we doing with these pictures after we’ve sent them? Do we agree that they’re going to be deleted? Are you okay with pictures in the first place? Because some people have no interest in that. It’s probably a good idea to not have any distinguishing features in a photo. So most people have thought of this, but maybe not, right? So if you have a really distinctive tattoo, maybe don’t take a picture of that part of your body. Um, you don’t have to have your face in the photos. They can be sexy shots without having a face. Think about, maybe, how to take a sexy picture that isn’t completely nude. So those are some things that you want to think about, and I would say make sure you’re doing it because you actually want to do it and that you feel empowered, right? Because I think sometimes people can feel a bit pressured, and especially right now because it’s, everyone is…. How shall I say this… lonely and horny?

(laughter)

DG: Not everyone, not everyone. But many, like, more people – especially now, almost a year into this pandemic – are really feeling it. Um, so, somebody might say something that feels like it’s pressuring you to do that, or you know, like, “if you really cared about me, then you’d do this.” Make sure that you’re doing it because you want to do it, and it’s something that you find value in for your sex life. That goes with all of these things, but especially cause there are some additional risks with the virtual stuff, I would just be really careful about that. I was reading that there is some different apps that protect your privacy more than other messaging systems, so if you’re going to be sending photos or sexting and you want to make sure that they’re really private, you can look into different types of apps. So the only one I know by name – and I haven’t tried it out, so this is not an endorsement, I don’t really know if it does what it says it does – but there’s one called “confide,” like “I’m confiding in you.” And they supposedly have blocked the mechanism that allows people to take screenshots, so meaning that if you were to send a nude, that somebody wouldn’t be able to save it without your knowledge and awareness. Um, so, you know, it sounds like there’s a lot of logistics and stuff to think about, and that is true. But I think it should more than deter people, just highlight how important that communication and negotiation is for every type of sexual activity that you’re having, and that it’s ongoing, right? Just because you agreed to, you know, one sexting conversation doesn’t mean that you agreed to everything else. Just because you agreed to one type of sex interaction doesn’t mean you agreed to everything else. Um, so you have to keep checking in with your partners and making sure they’re 100& okay with it. The other thing I would say is just because you talked about it or sexted it, that doesn’t mean you actually want to do it in real life. Um, so I think sometimes people are, “Well, you said you wanted to do it! You said that was hot when we were sexting!” And it’s like, yeah, because we weren’t actually doing it! (laughter) So, just something, it doesn’t always translate. And so again with the consent being ongoing thing, like just because someone texted you about this scenario that they were excited about, doesn’t necessarily mean that you can just jump into that when you see them in real life or in person. So, something to think about.

*E: Definitely. Cool, well that’s a ton of great information. Those are all the questions I had prepared, is there anything else you want to talk about or anything that you feel like we missed?*

DG: Um, I would just say that there’s a lot of safer sex resources at UNC that are available to students. The Center for Peer Education is awesome, they have safe sex gear, they have peer educators that you could have extensive conversations with about all of these topics, they’re trained for that. And so if you don’t want to talk to a family member or a friend or a professional, they’re your peers and you can have these conversations and kind of walk through or plan out how you might negotiate something with a partner.

DG: Um, the other thing I would say is I want to acknowledge that the folks who are living together – right, we’ve been kind of talking about casual sex or sex outside of the home or the household that you’re already in – but that doesn’t mean that it’s all like fun and games and hunky dory when you have a partner that you live with. You know, I think the pandemic creates other challenges when you are in a long term relationship and you’re living with each other, navigating boundaries and navigating free time and alone time in a whole new way. So I just want to acknowledge that too, that it’s okay to not want to have sex, and it’s okay to have different desires and just to make sure that you’re talking about those. Like, just because you live with somebody doesn’t mean you’re always 100% ready all of the time to have whatever type of sex they’re interested in. You’re still free to navigate and negotiate those boundaries, and that’s really important. And I think navigating the alone time right now is so important because that enhances the time you do have together and makes it more meaningful. So trying to get creative with how you negotiate your personal space is important.

DG: And the other thing that I would say, related to UNC resources, is that if you or anyone that you know is experiencing abuse or violence right now during the pandemic – and we know statistically that that is increasing because people are stuck at home potentially in a new way, or have less access to resources and to their social networks – if that is happening to you or someone you know, you can get in touch with an office on campus called ASAP. The Assault Survivor’s Advocacy Program at UNC is an amazing resource. They have advocates that can talk you through any situation, even if you don’t think it’s a serious one. If you’re having any sort of doubts or thoughts, you can call about yourself, but you can also call them about someone you care about, a family member or a friend. So I just wanna make sure, you know, we’ve talked a lot about sexual pleasure and desires and all of these important things. You know, on the flip side, sex isn’t always a wonderful thing, especially if it’s unwanted in any way. So as you’re navigating some of these issues, if you ever need help with those types of things, any type of lack of consent, or abuse, those resources are great. ASAP’s great, there’s another resource in the community called SAVA center, the Sexual Assault Victim Advocacy center, so that’s a community resource. And both of those have 24 hour hotlines, so it doesn’t have to be during business hours if you’re having any sort of concern. So I just want to make a shoutout to those resources and to acknowledge that this whole situation puts a lot of stress on people, and it puts a lot of stress on relationships. And that that is – I mean, it’s a normal thing to be stressed, but it’s not a normal thing to have someone take advantage of you or abuse you in any way. So, get help if you can. Reach out. UNC is great when it comes to this type of resource, so um, yeah.

*E: Perfect, thank you, those are really great. And the survivor’s advocates are not mandatory reporters either, right, so they are confidential if people want to talk about it?*

DG: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely, great point. Yeah, so both of these places, they’re going to be confidential, so at UNC, ASAP is one of the confidential resources, definitely.

*E: Cool. Hmm… Do I have any other questions? Okay, so yeah! So for people who are living together and maybe have mismatched sex drives, or just have different desires in general or are spending way more time together than they’re used to, how would you go about talking about needing alone time for maybe masturbation rather than sex with them, without making them feel like you don’t want them? Like, how do you communicate that it’s a separate need being filled?*

DG: Such a good question. And it’s really tough, because it gets really wrapped up in a lot of like, self esteem issues of a partner, and we don’t want to hurt a partner’s feelings. But exactly what you just said, that these are in some ways separate types of needs that… We know that people who masturbate when they’re in relationships, it’s not a substitute for sex with a partner, it’s not either a superior substitute or an inferior one, either way. People have a lot of perceptions that like, “Oh, if you’re masturbating when you’re in a relationship, something must be wrong, oh noo!” Um, so, how do you have those conversations without creating conflict or hurting somebody? I would always say it’s important to come from knowing what your own personal needs and your own boundaries are first, and using those classic communication skills of “I” statements, right? It isn’t about the other person at all, really. You’re saying, you know, I have a particular need that is best met when I have alone time, or I just want to have an orgasm and I don’t want to have to negotiate anyone else right now, it’s just a sexual release thing. So really just understanding what you need and being able to communicate that, being sure that it really is just something that you want to do on your own and it’s not because of some broader relationship problem that you’re having, right? Address the issue at hand, (laughs) so if you’re having a bigger relationship issue that’s a separate conversation that needs to happen, right?

DG: This isn’t to avoid dealing with some other issue, but it’s completely normal and, I would say, responsible to masturbate in a relationship and to, like I said, rely on yourself to get your needs met. Whether your partner is tired or, like you said, differences in desire happen all of the time and are super common. So rather than get mad at your partner because they don’t want to have sex tonight, it’s like, that’s not working, they don’t want to, and I’m gonna respect that and I’m gonna go make sure that I’m being taken care of well. You know, there might be ways to involve them if you want to. Like, I really don’t want you to touch me, but I would like to masturbate, if you wanna hang out with me while I do that, that’s cool. We could watch a TV show while I do this, or you could watch me, or we could both masturbate together. So there’s different ways to make it still intimate in a relationship without completely excluding them. But if anyone is trying to shame you for that or make it a bigger deal than it is, that’s a separate conversation that you want to have a bigger discussion about, that this is a legitimate need and desire. Um, and even if you’re not masturbating, the alone time for any sort of activity, for a shower, right? Or for a yoga class by yourself in your room, or any of those self care things. That’s really important to advocate for, especially right now, that if someone tries to say “well that means you don’t love me,” or you know, “why are you spending time by yourself,” or “we still haven’t spent enough time together today, why do you want to do that instead?” Those are tough conversations, but just advocate for yourself, knowing what you need, and trying to respect that in another person as well. And another thing you can do – I know this is long winded, but another thing! (laughs) -- is to explain why, right? Explain, like get into the details. You know, “I need these things,” or “this is important to me because,” whatever it might be. But you know, “I am going to come back to our relationship refreshed. If you don’t shame me about it, I’m just gonna do it and be done and like, 5 minutes later I’m back!” (laughs) Like, depending on what you’re doing, right? Like, let me just go deal with this and then we can watch the movie. So you know, explaining how it benefits the broader relationship, right? Like, me taking alone time is gonna mean that I am gonna come back focused on our relationship, or I’m going to come back to the relationship happier, more calm, less stressed out, right? All of these things are going to benefit both people, or multiple people, in the long run so rather than just making it like, “I need to do this, this is private, I don’t want to talk about it,” you know, explain why it is that you need those things.

*E: Perfect! That feels like we got a lot of good information in there. Thank you so much for sitting down and talking to me about it!*

DG: Well I hope your listeners know that they can reach out to me at any time and, again, I’m happy to again talk more about it. Definitely something, sexual safety is super important right now, so I’m glad you’re focusing in on it. It’s not easy, I think… Ugh, yeah it’s tough. It’s tough. As much as we have needs that need to be met, are those needs really worth… dying over? Or really worth, you know, causing someone else harm? That’s always my thing is like, is having an orgasm like in the long run, is that going to be worth me potentially infecting my friend and they die? (laughs) I know it’s morbid to think about, but when you’re like balancing out the grand scheme of the needs right now, it’s like oh maybe I should just hang out by myself.

DG: (laughs) Not to say, like, you’re automatically going to die if you go have sex with someone right now. That’s not what I’m saying! That’s extreme. But, you know, you want to be realistic about it. This is, the safety is not, or the risk is not exaggerated. I think a lot of young people especially think that the risk is exaggerated for that age group, and it’s just really not. Um, so, it’s important for everyone to be thinking about this, regardless of whether they have partners now or, we don’t know how long this is going to last, so maybe you’re doing fine right now, but in a month you want to come back to this podcast and relisten because you’re like, “actually, let me give this another thought.”

[outro music begins]

Elliot: Thank you so much for joining us for this episode today. Um, I know this stuff can be kind of hard and weird to talk about, but it is really really freeing to just start talking about it. And I’m excited that, if you’re listening to this, you’re on this journey with me! And it’s only going to go up from here, you know? All of the resources we mentioned in the episode will be linked in the episode description. Dr. Grose would also like to remind everybody that she is part of the Colorado School of Public Health, and if you are interested in the stuff we talked about today and are potentially considering a career in public health, that is a really great place to get your Master’s in it! Applications are currently being accepted all the way until May 1st for MPH degrees in community health education and global health, but you only have until February 15th to get your applications in for the shorter certificate in public heath sciences.

This program was brought to you by the University of Northern Colorado’s Center for Peer Education. Recorded in Greeley, Colorado by Elliot Sutton and Dr. Rose Grose. Editing and mixing by Elliot Sutton. Our incredible theme music was written by Cole Ramirez. You can find more of his stuff on soundcloud, @ Cole Ramirez. Thank you again for listening, I hope you’ll come back for all of the incredible stuff we have in store for next time. Uhh, stay fun, stay sexy, stay safe, and stay cool. I love you. Bye.

[music ends, end of podcast]