

# One Hot Minute

*Business Start-Up Edition* by Emily Mechtenberg, MS

## Anti-Oppression Work in Counseling

About a year ago, I read Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* at a time I had been grappling with my own white privilege. I finished the book and felt an immense sense of shame and guilt just for being white. This was a deeply new experience for me. Years leading up to my curiosity about the book, I had had transient points of reflection about my whiteness and what it meant in the context of our world, but reading *White Fragility* stopped me in my tracks. Although the book makes clear, constructive recommendations for how to move forward with a deeper understanding of white privilege, I still found myself defaulting to defensiveness. What was I supposed to do?, I thought. Go around feeling bad about the

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## Why sex (positive), gender, and relationship therapy?

### *How I Arrived Here...*

I began my masters program in counseling psychology with the intention of becoming a sex positive therapist. Prior to starting, I had become aware that nationwide, we had an abundance of therapists unsure of how to address sex in therapy and who were over-pathologizing what had been considered non-normative sexual behavior. Around that same time, I was learning that the field of psychology was being challenged by updated sex research, much of which debunked myths about the meaning and diagnoses of non-conforming sexual behaviors. Once immersed in my program, I researched, wrote about, and presented on all things sex, gender, and relationships. In my final semesters of grad

## Anti-racist work is essential.

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color of my skin? Then, it dawned on me that that is exactly what our society has asked of people of color for centuries, HELLO! Embarrassing, but true.

Global consciousness has since shifted about white folks' response, or lack of response, to racism in America. We, as white people, are currently being called to de-prioritize our own comfort in service of social justice, which can feel daunting in COVID times, but is absolutely essential.

In response to this call to action, I want clients to understand that my counseling sessions are a safe space to talk about how they are dealing with this cultural, relational shift. Whether you are feeling fed up, guilty, shameful, resistant, enraged, hopeful, or a combo of many feelings, I will work to understand and support you.

school, I completed my internship at the university I attended, which functioned a lot like a private practice. During internship, my clients and I covered a broad range of topics, including those I specialize in. My final work in the program, my thesis project, looked at relational approaches of adults who grew up with parents who practiced consensual non-monogamy. Spoiler alert: my interviewees were open-minded, highly articulate, and described practicing healthy relational habits in their adult lives. I continue to work on making that project into something useful.

Of course, the majority of the clients I worked with during internship lived within identities which align with dominant culture - most identified as heterosexual, monogamous, and as valuing traditional American relationship structures. I fully support, work with, and value dominant identities and traditional lifestyles as well.



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“Is this woman obsessed with sex, gender, and relationships?!”, you may be asking yourself. That is still to be determined. At this point, I think of it as a healthy, endless fascination with a

positive outlook. Also, the rebel in me will not let taboo topics rest, especially when some of what we talk about can be so fun, interesting, and sometimes hilarious. That said, I am well aware and sensitive to the fact that sex, gender, and relationships are domains of our lives in which we experience harm and trauma, too. I offer my counseling from a trauma-informed perspective and I am skilled at being with people, both individuals and couples, when they are feeling vulnerable.

### *How Might This Help?*

Life experience and plentiful scientific data support the notion that that sex, gender, and relationships are integral to who we are. Yet, we are still not socially permitted to express these parts of our identities without consequence. We judge each other...for being too “vanilla” and straight-laced, for not wanting sex or for wanting it too much, for doing sex work, for not being “masculine” or “feminine” enough or for being non-binary, for cheating, for being cheated on and then not leaving, for having an abortion or for becoming a teen parent, for choosing a relationship style other than monogamous, even if all parties involved have consented. We chastise as though the individuals we judge are not already criticizing themselves enough. And we do this because we are human.

An invaluable component of the counseling program I attended taught us to dredge up our personal biases so that we, as therapists, can keep our eyes on them while we work with clients. In the realms I’ve chosen to specialize in, I work from a place of openness, discovery, growth, and supporting wholeness. I understand that cultural narratives, whether spoken or not, are often unhelpful and aid in cementing shame. I see that not all expressions of sex, sexuality, gender, and relationships are perceived by the collective as legitimate. And I get that even when we are in culturally-supported relationships, we can still struggle deeply.

Effective therapy can lead to client insights about themselves that may seem to have always been there, but were dormant or waiting for the right time to surface. Counseling can often help clients get “unstuck” - sometimes quickly and sometimes it takes a while. My hope is that by using a framework of intersectional feminism (considering how all aspects of your unique identity have impacted your life), humanism (trusting that you are the expert on you), trauma-informed care, and sex positivity we can empower you to integrate the most challenging parts of your life so they function more like your superpower and less like your kryptonite. And if that sounds impossible, we can go slowly and work bit by bit.

Maybe surprisingly, maybe not, when we talk about sex, gender, and relationships, we often talk about everything. In sessions, work, family, childhood, parenting, addiction, religion, trauma, socioeconomic status, education, disability, racial experience come up. Often, if we acknowledge what we are carrying, it gives us an opportunity to make new, more manageable meaning of it.