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Sexual HEALING

Thanks to Gwynnie and co, understanding your pleasure through ‘Sexological Bodywork’ is on the rise. **Fleur Britten** heads to a workshop in north London – and dives right in

I’m lying naked, face up, on a massage bed. The (fully clothed) “sexological bodyworker” Aisha Paris Smith snaps on her latex gloves and asks, “Where would you like me?” Smith, a hands-on and — yikes — hands-in sex coach, is poised to do “everything”, including self-pleasure lessons, sex toy tutorials and “arousal mapping” — all in the name of her clients’ sexual enlightenment.

As someone who feels self-conscious in a swimsuit, I should be way out of my comfort zone, but Smith has me in some kind of zen spell. What’s more, where her latexed fingers venture is up to me. With Sexological Bodywork — or “Sex Bod” as it’s known — the client directs every move. “It’s about creating agency,” says Smith, 33, who is goddess-beautiful, stylishly dressed, and possessed of an unflappable, dreamy calmness. “Nothing happens except what you specifically ask for. It’s about feeling safe in your body.” Most people — she sees both men and women individually or as a couple (“Despite what we’re told, men do really need support in understanding their body”) — are accustomed to not speaking up about their sexual likes and dislikes. Sex Bod, however, is about “excavating our authentic sexual expression”.

If you’ve seen *Sex, Love & Goop*, all this will come as less of a shock. The 2021 Netflix series followed five American couples through relationship and Sex Bod coaching. There is mirrorwork — a self-acceptance exercise where you reflect on your naked body. There is arousal mapping, where participants direct the therapist around their bits, prospecting for maximum pleasure. (Gwyneth, by the way, who appears in the sofa-chat scenes, says she would do the “internals” — though hasn’t yet.) There are also nervous giggles, outpourings of tears, breakthroughs and a few first orgasms. “It has been extraordinary to realise how much there is we don’t know about who we really are as sexual beings,” Paltrow coos from her chic cream sofa.

With orgasms apparently on tap, Paltrow’s endorsement and pretty hefty fees, some may recall the so-called “Orgasm Cult”, OneTaste (the founder and a former executive are facing federal prosecution in America for forced labour conspiracy), and think “red flags”. Sex Bod is worlds apart, insist its teachers, and was the first sex training to be state-approved by California, meaning its practitioners can get business licences. In a word, it’s legit.

And now Sex Bod has arrived on our shores. We are “very lucky we can do this above board here”, Smith

says — it’s still illegal in much of Europe (and 49 US states). Smith, whose mission is to reverse our collective “pelvic numbness” and get everyone bonking better, is one of about a hundred full-time, qualified Sex Bod practitioners in Britain, regulated by the Association of Certified Sexological Bodyworkers (certification requires a minimum of seven months’ training).

People go to Smith in order to have that elusive first orgasm (“I believe everyone can,” she says), or locate their G-spot, rehabilitate their sex lives post-surgery or abuse, or just discover what they like, without any pressure to perform and please. She sees people “of all genders”, as well as couples whose sex lives have plateaued, or who want to take it to the next level; she has also run workshops at Cult Beauty and Soho Farmhouse. One client, a survivor of sexual abuse, was previously so numb she didn’t realise her vibrator had run out. Now, she tells me, “I finally get why people like sex” — her body is so sensitive, vibrators are too much. Smith’s sympathetic bedside manner makes more sense when you know her backstory: aged 16 she ran away from a difficult, violent home, from Hertfordshire to Dorset. In her twenties, while working in health food, she discovered Tantra — and pleasure — in Asia. Now seeing sex as “a tool for intimacy”, she researched what more was out there and discovered Sex Bod. Four years ago, after a year’s training, she qualified.

When I arrive at Smith’s Islington therapy room, flustered and apprehensive, she invites me to “take a few breaths to notice where you are, notice what sensations are moving through your body, what emotions are starting to surface”. Nothing, she reassures, happens without being fully relaxed and in your body — she uses breathwork, low-level music and “noticing” exercises to help you get there. I was booked in for a 2½-hour quickie (from £550; £220 online), but once you see how she works (“I’m very slow, I’m very grounding; I’m like the earth in a plug”) you can understand the popularity of her six-hour “immersions” (from £1,250), where you can really take your time.

Does anything embarrass Smith, I ask. She laughs: “No! The sessions are very maternal, with complete acceptance.” One client, Sarah*, concurs: “There’s no judgment. There’s nothing she hasn’t heard. She’s tremendously informed.” Sarah did a full-day immersion with her



Aisha Paris Smith is a speaker, life coach and Sex Bod practitioner

partner of three years in order to deepen their sexual connection: “To say your innermost sexual desires would ordinarily feel very vulnerable, but you always feel held here — it’s an incredible gift.”

Having already sent me her “tools” list, which includes mapping, massages and “bossy touch” [bossing someone around your body], Smith and I agree on the rules of consent. Establishing a plan and boundaries — for example, that there’s no expectation to undress, that erotic touch is strictly one-way (from coach to client), that gloves will be used, that touch is at the request of the client — is what creates this safe space.

I start with mirrorwork, a type of exposure therapy where you “consciously undress”, talking through your thoughts. As I face my naked winter body in the mirror, I notice my pasty legs, surgery scars and weird tummy button. “We zone in on what we think of as problem areas, missing the picture as a whole,” Smith notes. It prompts me to realise out loud that, actually, I have nothing to complain about. Smith repeats my realisation back to me, a technique intended “to update your sense of self”.

Before we move on to the next exercise — a naked catwalk for the duration of Christina Aguilera’s *Beautiful* (my choice) — Smith double-checks that I’m still up for it: “Bring yourself into that thought. Is that still a yes in your body?” Being head-led, I have no idea, but I stick to the schedule. Its purpose is to boost my sense of agency, embodiment and confidence — I’m up for that.

I’d expected this to be fun but as the song starts, tears begin streaming down my cheeks. Slowly, though, my hips start to swing, my arms rise up, and soon I’m filling the space with my badass body. I’m confused by the tears: “We don’t need to understand,” Smith says. “We need to be able to clear our channels so that we don’t get stuck by things we’ve suppressed.” Another client of Smith’s, Teresa*, a 41-year-old married wellbeing facilitator who had 12 sessions to help her orgasm, found the exercise empowering: “You reclaim who you are and what you want,” she tells me. “Previously I felt I didn’t deserve what I wanted — I had to push it down and play the good girl.”

As Christina fades away, I climb (naked, of course) on to the massage bed to “rest and digest” for a few minutes, with a recorded soundbath to “support” me. It’s hard to relax, though, because next up is the arousal mapping. But I also know that if I can get over myself I could unlock my true sexual self — who wouldn’t want that?

Smith reminds me that I’m in charge by offering some choices: where do I want her to stand? Do I want a sheet over me? (Yes.) A mirror? (No!) Then it’s up to me to guide her, but mercifully she offers some suggestions: “Sometimes I start with my hands here. What would feel good for you? More pressure?” I found it surprisingly easy to forget where the pleasure was coming from. I did not miss all the usual mental noise: “Do I look OK? Do I smell OK? Do they? Do I actually fancy them?” Smith and I proceed super-slowly because we can — the only goal here is self-discovery: “I don’t need anything to happen,” she says. “Even if nothing happened, so much happened.”

So how to measure efficacy? Well, it’s not necessarily about the big “O”, Teresa says. “With Aisha, I learnt that pleasure is more complex and expansive than orgasm. And that trying to achieve something can do more damage than good. Instead, she widened my perspective about how to experience pleasure, things that I thought were taboo, I now want to explore.”

Meanwhile, for Sarah and her boyfriend, the work brought them “closer together — we’re more honest about what we want and don’t want.” Sex for them is now

more about quality than quantity: although they didn’t think they needed to work on consent, they learnt that “it’s so nuanced”, Sarah says. For example, “doing things because I don’t want to let him down” is not enthusiastic consent.

And from sexual empowerment comes personal empowerment. “The work changed how I put myself into the world,” Teresa adds. “I now realise that I deserve what I want. People pick up on that — jobs land in my lap and my husband is more affectionate.” Being able to ask for what you want, Smith says,

“affects so many other parts of your life — your work, your friendships, food, money. When we’re connected to our body, we’re attuned to that voice that guides us. At first it’s work to get in touch with the body, then it’s work to deny the body.” Perhaps we could all do with having some of what they’re having. ■

aishaparissmith.com

*Names have been changed. Photograph: Adriana Boslin