

Dr. Ruth speaks to new sex ed class

by Julia Guzy
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Talking about sexuality with peers and keeping realistic expectations are the keys to successful sexual literacy in college, famed sex therapist Dr. Ruth said yesterday.

As a guest speaker for a new class focused on managing mental health called **"Success in College: Thriving at NYU,"** "Dr. Ruth" Westheimer stressed the importance of sexual literacy in an attempt to debunk the myths associated with college sexuality.

"Today, there are less unintended pregnancies because we're talking about sexuality," she said.

Westheimer said college students of today are more sexually literate than those of previous generations despite an alarming void of sexual education in higher education settings.

"Many colleges and universities are not including sexual education in curriculum," she said. "This is troublesome in medical and social work schools. A person from these fields has to know."

The prevalence of sex in the media can promote healthy sexual discussion, she said.

"Sex sells. At the newsstand, if there's something about sex, I'm the first one to buy it," Westheimer said. "When 'Sex and the City' came on TV, I was the first to buy HBO."

Westheimer said that college students must not have unrealistic expectations of sexual encounters portrayed in the media.

"What I do have a problem with is that people don't realize [Sex and the City] is Hollywood, [it's] fantasy," she said. "If it's taken as a reality, there will be a lot of disappointment. There are not 20 men in New York waiting to take women off to Paris."

Students must consider other stressors in their life before engaging in sexual encounters, Westheimer said.

"People take all of their anger and worries into bed," she said. "Make a package of everything you worry about — leave it outside the bedroom door. It'll be there for you later."

Westheimer said the myths surrounding sex can also impact experiences in the bedroom.

"There is a tremendous amount of work to burying myths related to pregnancy and other aspects of sexuality," Westheimer said. "Many of these myths have to be buried for people to be sexually literate and enjoy their sex lives."

In its first semester, the one-credit course aims to help students prepare for a successful transition to college and independent living by introducing them to the stressors and emotional changes that occur, according to a syllabus for the course.

The course features a series of notable guest speakers with background in psychiatry or psychology and is taught by Jess P. Shatkin, director of education and training at the NYU Child Study Center and assistant professor of psychiatry. The course is a joint effort by the Steinhardt School of Education and the Child Study Center in the School of Medicine.

“The impetus is the increasing prevalence of mental illness,” Shatkin said. “It’s recognized nationally that college students are a neglected group, and we need to think about their mental health.”

Shatkin said students complete dialogue journals via e-mail in response to weekly lectures and discuss the topics in class. The course is offered pass/fail and students will receive formal written evaluations at the end of the course, he said.

“We are very interested in looking at what students ascertain from the talks,” Shatkin said. “Students are very, very open in talking about themselves in a plain way.”

Though the course was open to all undergraduates, three-fourths of enrolled students are freshmen and sophomores — the target audience, Shatkin said.

“This first class was kept purposefully small so that we will be able to sharpen the focus,” Shatkin said.

The course will be offered each semester and its content and reach will expand, Shatkin said.

“We started out with topics we know really well and thought people would be interested in,” Shatkin said. “Now, we are looking to pick up on what people are engaged in.”

Some students said the one-credit course would be a welcome addition to their standard course load.

“It’s an interesting idea,” Tisch freshman Jager Weatherby said. “It would be a nice change from general classes.”

Other students said that even though they felt secure with their own knowledge of sexuality, the course is a positive way to educate their peers.

“I probably wouldn’t take it,” Steinhardt freshman Rebecca Schumer said. “I would feel like I know most of the [course material]. It may be good for kids who didn’t have that background.”

Westheimer, an internationally recognized psychosexual therapist for 25 years, hosted the internationally syndicated NBC radio show “Sexually Speaking” for 10 years and has appeared on over 450 programs. She is the author of many books, including “Sex for Dummies,” which is published in 27 languages. Westheimer is an adjunct professor in the Continuing Education department of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies.