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Here is the transcript for:

Dr. Rose Schlaff: Secrets to Unlocking Greater Intimacy



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Brielle Starr [00:00:00]:

Hello, Avaiya family. I'm Brielle Starr, online education coordinator for Avaiya. Avaiya is the creator of over a 1000 books, films, courses, teachings, and other supportive resources. Thank you so much for joining us. Our fellow teacher, doctor Rose Schlaff, is with us today to talk about the neuroscience of desire. Welcome to Avaiya, Dr. Rose.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:00:24]:

I'm so happy to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

Brielle Starr [00:00:27]:

Absolutely. I am so glad to have you here today. I can't wait to learn about all your knowledge in the pelvic health world as well as neuroscience. But before we get into all those nitty gritty details, I'd love to learn a little bit more about you. Could you tell us about how you got into this work and perhaps what are some of the most common reasons that people seek out your services specifically?

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:00:51]:

Yes. Absolutely. Thank you for asking. So my, you know, growing up, I was always that person that people would say, like, this is probably too much information, but I don't really know who else to ask. And so I have always been that person that talks about sensitive topics and and makes the weird things, the uncomfortable things comfortable. And, you know, growing up, I also was going to a lot of physical therapy with my mom. She had chronic pain and then was later

diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. So I had these two parts of me and kinda wanted to be a sex therapist, kinda wanted to be a physical therapist, realized I could be a physical therapist for the muscles of the pelvic floor.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:01:31]:

So, you know, these are the muscles that have anything to do with pee, poop, and sex. And right out of my doctoral training, I was working at a world renowned sexual medicine facility, called San Diego Sexual Medicine. So every single person who would see us, we would have people come from around the world, would see a sexual medicine physician doing hormone management and surgical care, a sex therapist, and myself. So some of the most common things we saw there were pain with sex, decreased libido, difficulty with orgasm. We also saw people with penises, so erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, that sort of thing. And I was in complete heaven there. And at the same time, I began teaching at University of Michigan, training the other, you know, people who were becoming sex therapists such as sex educators, sex counselors. So professionally in heaven, personally, my health is completely exploding.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:02:33]:

And although I'm in this world renowned facility and on the cutting edge of Western medicine, I still wasn't getting the questions that I need needed answered from the medical model. I was getting a lot of, oh, your lab tests are fine or, oh, you know, it'll probably just clear up. And this kind of medical gaslighting that I was seeing reflected in my patient's experience as well, especially those of us who are women, socialized as female. Right? There's a lot of medical gaslighting going

on. And that's when I really started to get curious about how we can additionally support our mind, our body, our relationships where the western medical system stops. So I, you know, got a hypnosis certification. I did a deep dive into functional nutrition and holistic coaching and somatics. I got really interested in the nerves, the cranial nerves that control the eyes, the ears, the face, and, a lot of people have heard of the vagus nerve that's in our brain stem as well.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:03:38]:

So how we can use neuroscience and specific exercises that target these cranial nerves to create fast shifts in our body and our emotional state in about 30 seconds or less. And what I needed to heal myself when I started sharing it with my clients, I saw much better outcomes, especially those who were experiencing pain with sex, experiencing difficulty with orgasm, and experiencing low libido and wondering why. And so I've created, my own model, the Reclaim the Flame method, and it combines my experiences as a pelvic physical therapist specializing in sexual wellness. It combines hypnosis techniques, functional nutrition, somatic techniques, nervous system techniques. And we take people through a 3 part, series, 3 pillars, right, where we get physiologically in the right gear in your nervous system, in your pelvic floor where you're optimized for intimacy. We get you to to decrease pressure and stress around sex. There's a lot of sneaky ways that we put pressure on ourselves. We can talk about it more today if you'd like.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:04:49]:

And we also help people turn up the volume on their desire. I think a lot of people come to me and they're like, I've tried the lingerie. We've

tried the date nights. We've tried, you know, having some wine, trying some new lube. It doesn't really seem to work because a lot of the time people try to turn up the volume on desire without optimizing the nervous system and pelvic floor and without addressing those sneaky resistance and pressure, places. And so without those two pieces, we're just not gonna be successful. So that's usually the 3rd step in my program.

Brielle Starr [00:05:23]:

Mhmm. Beautifully said. Thank you so much for sharing about all this amazing work that you do and how you came to do it. It's always so fascinating to hear how people started on their own personal journey into their passion and what they help other people do now. And you just mentioned that people tend to not address those things such as pelvic floor issues or nervous system imbalances. How do those pelvic floor issues and nervous system imbalances impact sexual desire, arousal, and orgasms?

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:05:56]:

Absolutely. So I I think a lot of the time people think of pelvic floor with pregnancy or postpartum, but there's a lot of different things that are sneaky pelvic floor dysfunction. Right? Feeling like we quote unquote have a small bladder. Right? Where we're peeing every 30 minutes to an hour. That's could be a sign of pelvic floor dysfunction. Having recurring UTIs, that could be a sign of pelvic floor dysfunction. Having pain or discomfort during penetration or gynecological exam or even with orgasm or arousal, that could be sneaky pelvic floor dysfunction. 95% of people with low back pain have some kind of pelvic floor dysfunction.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:06:34]:

So there's all these things that we don't necessarily think about, same with hip pain. I have my, pelvic model here. I always like to show this is a hip muscle. This is the pelvic floor. Right? So hip and pelvic floor are super connected. A lot of the time people have nagging hip pain. They go to normal physical therapy. It doesn't address it.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:06:55]:

And then once we address the pelvic floor, that'll go away. So they've seen that, when they hook people up to surface electrodes and they show them threatening movies, the first two muscles to contract in our body are our shoulders and our pelvic floor. They're part of a general threat mechanism. And so think about the stressors we have in our daily life, how often we're holding tension and stress in our shoulders or in our jaw. We can be holding that kind of tension and stress in the show in the pelvic floor as well. They also see that after periods of intense stress like PTSD, even after successful treatment of PTSD, we still have 2.7 times more likelihood of pelvic floor dysfunction and 2.4 times more likelihood of sexual dysfunction. So difficulty with orgasm, difficulty with arousal or desire, and pain with intimacy has all been linked to pelvic floor dysfunction. But the good news is is that pelvic floor muscle training and even practicing genital based mindfulness techniques.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:08:01]:

So bringing more awareness to the genitals, more awareness to the pelvic floor has been shown to significantly improve arousal, desire, lubrication, ability to orgasm, and significantly decreases sex related distress. So even though it's like, oh my gosh, all these things could be sneaky pelvic floor dysfunction, I always tell people if you resonated with anything on that list, you're not alone. These are common things, and everything is shiftable. With the right exercises, we can retrain it, and you can be even better than before, better than you imagined.

Brielle Starr [00:08:38]:

Mhmm. Yeah. Thank you so much for addressing that and telling us about some of those common issues that people might be experiencing that could be related to their pelvic floor. And so if someone is experiencing some of those issues and they wonder if it's related to their pelvic floor, how can they know for sure? How do you go about that?

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:08:58]:

So you can go to a pelvic floor physical therapist and get a hands on assessment. That's one option. Another option is you can begin to practice pelvic floor awareness exercises and stretches and see if it shifts. The thing about the pelvic floor is, I'll just kinda give a little intro for anyone who who doesn't know. So we have 3 layers of muscles here at the pelvic floor and every person regardless of your genitals has a pelvic floor. So whether you have a penis, you know, whatever you're you've got going on down here, there is a pelvic floor. So for people with vulvas, we have this surface layer of muscles that's

supporting those external structures including the internal clitoris here. This blue part is the internal clitoris.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:09:42]:

And so we can see that if those muscles were tight, just like when we white knuckle, the blood goes away from the knuckles. If muscles are tight, it keeps blood from flowing to the clitoris and can keep blood from lubricating that tissue. Now, there's a second layer of muscles that holds our poop and pee in, but then we have deeper layer of muscles, that lives in here. You can see it's right attached to that tailbone. So it's it's connected to the end of the spine. No no wonder 95% of people with low back pain have some kind of pelvic floor dysfunction. But these are the deeper muscles. I just kinda pulled them out.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:10:19]:

So tailbone, anus, vaginal opening or the penis would be here. Same muscles wrap around the vagina and the anus. And these muscles need to be able to contract to hold our poop and pee in, to rhythmically generate an orgasm, to support our spine. They need to be able to relax and lengthen for us to get a deep breath in. The pelvic floor and diaphragm are actually connected like a piston in a car. So as we breathe in, the diaphragm lowers, our bellies expand, and our pelvic floor expands just like our belly does. The thing about this 360 expansion. As we exhale, diaphragm lifts, pelvic floor lifts.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:11:01]:

So we need to be able to fully relax to let our poop and pee and gas out and to be able to allow for pain free penetration. So the reason why I say, sometimes we don't need a hands on pelvic floor muscle assessment. Sometimes we need to just start some breathing techniques because breathing actually optimizes the coordination of the pelvic floor. Right? So we need to be able to contract, and we need the up to be able to relax. So as we breathe in, we're practicing the relaxation of the pelvic floor. As we breathe out, we're practicing the contraction. I don't know if it would be helpful to teach you guys a breathing technique today. If you'd like me to, I can.

Brielle Starr [00:11:40]:

Absolutely. I'd love 5. If you wanted to now, I would I would love to

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:11:44]:

do that. Sure. So I think a lot of the time, it's hard to have a conscious awareness of our pelvic floor just because we haven't been taught to be aware of this part of our body unless we are actively having sex or or pooping or peeing, right, or washing ourselves in the shower. So I want you to I'm gonna just lower this a little bit. We're gonna put our hands on our rib cage. And as we breathe in, you're gonna notice your hands expand. I also want you to notice your belly expand forward, and I want you to imagine your pelvic floor is doing that same expansion down. So we're breathing in, thinking about breathing down to the tailbone.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:12:23]:

And if you can't quite feel your pelvic floor, that's okay. Just bring your awareness down to that area as you notice your hands expand on the rib cage. We're gonna do that 3 or 4 times. So we're gonna breathe in and out. Breathe out as long as you can. And you might notice on the end of your exhale that this lower abdominal portion starts to kinda tighten and activate. If we can feel that lower abdominal portion tighten and activate at the end of exhale, that's like BFFs with our pelvic floor. So if we were somebody who was urinating really frequently, who had pain, who has back pain, I would just work on the relaxation part and not worry about contraction.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:13:15]:

If you're somebody who's leaking urine with a cough, laugh, or sneeze, or you're, noticing it's trouble you're having trouble, holding in gas and you're working on strengthening, then we can practice that with the exhale slowly, gently contracting the pelvic floor. So thinking about closing and lifting. And then as we inhale, fully relaxing. So we're kind of reestablishing that connection between the brain, the breath, and the pelvic floor. So if you can't get yourself to a pelvic floor physical therapist, that would be a great place to start. Even thinking down to the pelvic floor, noticing, okay. How is my, you know, how does it feel as I'm breathing? What sensations am I aware of? That's practicing genital based mindfulness.

Brielle Starr [00:14:05]:

Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing that little practice with us. And I found it really fascinating. I don't know why in my mind I would think to relax on the exhale rather than the inhale. But when we

actually did it together, I was like, oh, that feels way different than what I was expecting. So super interesting. I love that you shared that.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:14:26]:

Yes. And different practices use exhale and inhale differently. Like, if you have certain tantric practitioners, you may see they reverse it. But the reason why I relax on the inhale is just because that's the physiology. Right? But the the intra abdominal pressure is such that we're supposed to expand on the inhale. So when we're thinking about physiologically restoring the balance of the pelvic floor, that's why we relax on the inhale and then contract on the exhale. Mhmm.

Brielle Starr [00:14:54]:

Yeah. Super fascinating. I just love learning about that. And so then kind of on the neuroscience side of things, how can neuroscience based techniques unlock greater intimacy and desire and pleasure for people?

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:15:08]:

Great question. So we talked about how the pelvic floor and the shoulders hold tension when we're under stress. So we can stretch our shoulders. We can stretch our pelvic floor as much as we want. But if we don't change our nervous system's assessment of safety, that is never going to be a pattern that's interrupted. Right? We're gonna consistently be tensing our pelvic floor and and shoulders every single day. So think about the nervous system as the root cause oftentimes of pelvic floor dysfunction. So we wanna start to identify I

when I talk about the nervous system, just like the pelvic floor has a balance, nervous system does too.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:15:50]:

And I think when we look at our pets, we can see that balance a little bit easier. Right? So our pets are either zoomies. They're like running around, zooming, zooming, zooming, or asleep. Right? And our nervous system is designed to go in and out of action. So action and inaction, action, action and inaction. And what we see is we're supposed to move in and out of that every single day, multiple times a day. But because our society is, you know, a capitalistic society that's very urgency based, we are actually really rewarded for being more in the action taking nervous system as much as possible. Right? So we can be as productive as possible and, you know, take fewer breaks and make more money for our bosses or whatever.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:16:34]:

Right? And so sometimes it's harder for us to shift. The reason why this matters is because when we're thinking about desire, only 15%, 1 5 percent of women and people with vulvas experience desire spontaneously. That's like, oh, I feel in the mood. It just kinda hit me. Right? Like, kinda like, oh, I'm hungry now. I I should eat. Only 15%. 85% of us experience desire either through responsive desire or contextual desire.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:17:07]:

Contextual desire is, like, if I'm on the beach with a Mai Tai, totally down. If I just got a stressful work email, absolutely not. Right? And sometimes context is in our control. Right? We can intentionally make a vacation or take a break. Sometimes copy context isn't. Right? Like, what's going on in the world or, you know, family dynamics, stuff like that. What is in our control a lot of the time is this 3rd desire style which is responsive desire. And responsive desire, I think of it as my dessert stomach desire.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:17:39]:

So we are responding to something. So think about you've just eaten, you're not hungry, you go over to your friend's house and they're making fresh baked cookies. And immediately you smell it and your mouth starts watering. You're like, woah. Like, I didn't think I wanted any more food, but that smells amazing. I am definitely gonna make room. Doesn't matter if I'm hungry or not hungry, like, I need to eat. Right? And so I always tell my clients we have to figure out what helps you smell the cookies, so to speak.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:18:09]:

But there are 2 things that get in the way of us smelling the cookies and having our bodies respond. One is a pressure build environment, and that can be internal or external pressure. Right? A partner that has a higher drive than you. Are you feeling like a bad partner? Are you feeling like, oh, I'm I'm not, you know, showing up the way that that my partner deserves or a good wife or partner has sex x amount of times a day or x amount of times a week or x amount of times a month. Right? Or even pressure while we're in the bedroom. Right? Oh, I'm taking too long. Oh, you know, I'm not I'm not spicing it up

enough or maybe my body looks weird. And I wanna normalize that first, thing I I said, which is that, like, a partner that has a higher libido.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:18:56]:

80% of couples have situations where 1 person or perton partner wants to have sex and the other doesn't. 80% of couples. So really common. And if you're experiencing this in your relationship, congratulations. You're in a human relationship. Right? It's it's pretty common. And once we understand the science of the nervous system and the science of desire, we can use certain strategies to shift it. So the other thing that gets in the way of this smelling the cookies desire, right, where we're reading a romance novel and then we're in the mood or our partner starts, you know, rubbing our shoulders and then we're in the mood or maybe we see our partner be a good parent or clean the whole kitchen.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:19:42]:

We're like, oh, they're looking pretty good. Right? Like, there's a lot of things that can help us smell the cookies so to speak. But a nervous system and pelvic floor that is not in the right gear, gets in the way. So I say this because when we're thinking about that nervous system up and down, men and people with penises can experience max genital arousal down here in the rest zone. They are just, like, good to go. Ready. Women and people with vulvas actually need to be halfway into that action taking nervous system. We have to be in moderate sympathetic nervous system activation to have maximum genital arousal.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:20:22]:

And I think this is why so many of us need to smell the cookies, so to speak. Because when we're at rest, we need we need something to activate us and excite us into that mid range. Sometimes I'll say, like, men are like microwaves, women are like ovens that need to, you know, preheat a little bit. And the problem is because so many of us are go go go go go because of our society, a lot of us are actually at the max of that action taking nervous system instead of here where we need to be. So we're in fight and flight. Our mind is racing. We're thinking about the email we forgot to send. And so when we go to smell the cookies, when we go to get excited, we zoom up even further and sometimes end up in freeze, which is like complete avoidance.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:21:12]:

And signs that you're in in freeze or in your sex life are, you know, your partner goes to hold your hand and you're already thinking 3 steps ahead and thinking, oh, I better shut this down because I don't want this to go anywhere. I don't want them to get their hopes up. Right? Or or your partner goes to to kiss you or hug you and you're like, not tonight. Like so you're not even present and enjoying the connection that you're having. You're so worried about where it's going to lead. And taking the pressure off of the outcome, taking the pressure off of orgasm and penetration can be a really helpful strategy. That's one thing that I oftentimes will do with my clients. We redefine what successful sex looks like.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:21:51]:

Right? Not just what society shows us. But what we need to do is identify where am I in this cycle? Am I having trouble shifting? What are my strategies to shift? And the fastest thing that I've found are cranial nerve exercises to bring us quickly out of that fight and flight and down the cycle a little bit. Again, I can show you guys a couple if you'd like. I know we're getting close to time, but, up to you.

Brielle Starr [00:22:20]:

Yeah. No. I'd I'd love to hear about those. I could always I know I could always use some more of that type those type of practices.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:22:27]:

Awesome. Shouldn't take long. They're super fast, which is why I love them because they're easy to do. If you wanna do them with me at home, you can either choose, something to assess or reassess. So anxiety level, busyness of your mind, maybe a physical pain. So choose a 0 to 10. Sometimes I'll have my clients choose like openness to intimacy as a 0 to 10. So that's the first thing you can do.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:22:55]:

I like testing range of motion because you you see it. You're like, wow, I'm much further on that range. So there's no question. So if you're choosing range of motion, you can get up and do rotation with me, or you can just do your neck and see how tight it feels and see if it shifts. But, let's if you want to stand, And we're gonna stand with our feet touching. And then we're gonna put our hands out in front and rotate so that we can see where our hands are aiming. So I've got, like, a

lamp, and I've got a picture frame. So then choose your range of motion.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:23:35]:

And if you wanna stay seated, you could choose your neck or you can choose a 0 to 10 to test. And then we're gonna start with just a simple exercise that activates the eyes. We're gonna just start looking around the room. So they've seen that eye exercises and eye movements actually release dopamine. As you're doing this, I want you to notice any signs that you're shifting. Any yawning? Any sighing? Any mouth fluttering? I Yawn pretty immediately with this. And they've also seen that eye exercises actually significantly decrease emotional distress. We spend so much of our time looking at our computers, at our phones.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:24:19]:

And because of that, it it keeps our brain in that fight and flight zone. Right? That's where we're looking when we're kinda looking at predators. Alright. And then the last thing we're gonna do with our eyes is focus straight ahead and expand our awareness left, right, and up and down as much as we can. So we're not moving the eyes. We're just kind of imagining like we're in a field. We're just like taking in a a gorgeous field. And again, we're kinda sending that signal to the brain like, look, I'm grazing in a field.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:24:48]:

I'm safe. And I always see on with these. So I'm gonna retest my rotation. If you're at home and you're doing rotation with me, go for that. Or if you wanna check your neck. So I'm literally hit it. I just hit the wall. My rotation improved so much.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:25:10]:

So that's one. We could also practice that pelvic floor breathing and try the range of motion again to see how much that shifts. And the last one that I'm gonna give you guys is it's called skin stimulation. We're just gonna be touching the skin of our neck and our ears. And go ahead and if you want to, I know we're like we've got headphones and and microphones that you can even wiggle your ears. Your vagus nerve goes to your ears. Touching the neck, touch the head. And you can notice, you know, like, okay.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:25:50]:

How do I feel? I get chills all over my body as soon as I start doing this, and how, you know, how's my anxiety level? How how am I feeling? And so, again, if you're testing range of motion, you can test that. My neck just got a ton more range of motion. How did that feel for you? How were those?

Brielle Starr [00:26:08]:

I loved both of them. I especially loved the the ear one. I felt that one, like, almost immediately. I really liked that. That was good. But, yeah, I can I definitely feel my neck feels like it feels easier to move it? I still have tension for sure, but yeah. Yeah. The it's much easier.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:26:26]:

Yes. Absolutely. And so we think about, you know, just taking that pressure off the body. The reason why the range of motion increases, the reason why things get easier is because think about that tension in our pelvic floor and in our shoulders that under that is kind of driven by the nervous system. We're calming it down and creating a little bit more safety. And the reason why this matters for your sex life is because the faster you can shift your nervous system into more of, like, a relaxed state, then you're optimized to be able to start smelling the cookies, to be able to start making out and actually get in the mood instead of, like, go into a stress place. Right? And so we combine this with somatic and formed sex counseling and other techniques to really turn up the volume on desire. But that's that's kind of, like, how we optimize the pelvic floor and the nervous system in a nutshell.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:27:23]:

That's the the, like, 3 minute version.

Brielle Starr [00:27:26]:

Yes. Absolutely amazing. I loved learning about those practices and just hearing about the importance of both our nervous system and our pelvic floor. And I also just really loved the smelling the cookies analogy, if that's the correct term. I it it really helps me picture it and get a great idea of what you were sharing about, so that was super

helpful as well. And are there any final insights you'd like to share before we wrap up, doctor Rose?

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:27:56]:

I think that understanding your physiology is one of the most powerful weapons of self compassion we have. I think that when we don't understand the physiology, it's easy to feel broken, it's easy to feel lazy, it's easy to feel like everybody else is having this amazing sex, why not me? And I want every person to walk away from, you know, this training, the neuroscience of desire, a free call with me knowing you're not alone. You're not broken. There's real science behind why you're feeling the way you're feeling, and there's always ways to shift it. Everything is figureoutable. And I've worked with, you know, people in their seventies. I've worked with parents. I've worked with, people who've been through years of pain or past traumatic experiences.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:28:43]:

And I've seen these techniques move the needle on all of those people. And, you know, there is hope. There is possibility of shifting.

Brielle Starr [00:28:53]:

Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and your hope with us today.

Dr. Rose Schlaff [00:28:58]:

Thank you so much.

Brielle Starr [00:29:00]:

And I also want to thank our Avaiya students for joining us today, and we will see you again real soon.



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