

CASING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:

CASE STUDIES IN PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

THIRD EDITION

Dawn O. Braithwaite, Kelly R. Rossetto, Jeffrey T. Child, & Julia T. Wood

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www.kendallhunt.com

Send all inquiries to:
4050 Westmark Drive
Dubuque, IA 52004-1840

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Journaling Our Past: Memorable Stories About Sex Communication, Education, and Relationships

**Allison Bonander
Amanda Holman**

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Jude sat on a bench in the center of campus. The magnolia and pear trees were in full bloom, lining the sidewalk with their pink and white flowers. He sipped on his coffee and watched other students slowly walk to their morning classes. He couldn't believe it was the spring semester of his senior year. Where did the time go? In just a few months he would be a college graduate and starting Occupational Therapy (OT) school in late summer. His thoughts of OT school were interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. "Hey buddy, you are always drinking the blackest cowboy coffee on campus," his best friend Simon joked. Jude sipped his coffee and said, "I still can't believe you talked me into taking a 9:30 a.m. class our senior year. You know I'm not a morning person."

Simon laughed, "At least it's not 8:00 a.m. like that biology class we had together in high school." "True," Jude replied smiling. Jude had met Simon in middle school, and they bonded

over hot wings, video games, and playing baseball together. They became fast friends and eventually college roommates. Simon is the most hilarious person Jude has ever known. He's not afraid to grab the attention of the room and tell everyone his spicy stomach is about to burst, but "the burrito was worth it." Although he makes most of his light-hearted jokes, bloopers, and witty comments to bring the fun to every interaction, Simon has partially used humor as a coping strategy to make sure people would still like him once they found out he was gay. Simon had some hurtful experiences with family and friends over his life. Jude was the first person Simon came out to in middle school; but it was never a big deal with them. If anything, watching Simon handle judgment and biases with such poise helped Jude navigate his own ups and downs in life.

Jude and Simon casually reminisced about their weekend as they walked across campus to their morning class. Jude gave Simon a fist bump and said, "I can't believe you scarfed down fifteen napalm fire wings at Mick's this weekend." "Yeah, I think it may take weeks for my taste buds to recover," Simon replied proudly as they entered the classroom. They were greeted with a smile from their professor and strategically slipped into two seats in the back row. He wasn't sure about Simon, but Jude was having first-day of class jitters. Maybe he drank too much coffee this morning, or maybe it was because the class was called *Communication and Sexuality*, and he was a little nervous about any awkwardness that may arise. He vividly remembered the discomfort he felt in eighth grade sex ed and did not want to repeat that catastrophe. Simon, on the other hand, looked relaxed, which didn't surprise Jude. Even though Simon has experienced stigma surrounding being a gay man, he has always been very comfortable in who he is and his romantic relationships. Jude had heard great things about the course, and they wanted to take one last class together before they graduated and moved to the opposite sides of the country.

"This is probably the one class where we'll find out who is single on campus. It's like a dating app, but I'm getting credit for it!" Simon joked. Their soft chuckles were interrupted by their professor, Dr. Edwards, greeting the class and going over the course structure, syllabus, and topics. She spent time emphasizing the importance of a class culture that creates a safe space to critically reflect and share. "The topics we cover in this course may be difficult, awkward, and even triggering to reflect on, so to help each of you navigate your own experiences in connection with the readings, you will journal each week to prepare for class discussion," she stated as she handed them each a journal notebook. She continued to explain that for the first journal assignment, they needed to write four stories of *memorable* conversations or interactions they have had about sex-related topics over their life. Dr. Edwards instructed the class to be as detailed as possible about the conversations and reflect on how it made them think and feel about sex-related topics. Jude was relieved to hear that he could reflect privately before discussing it in class. He laughed to himself as he saw Simon grinning. Simon loved telling stories, and he had a lot to tell.

That night Jude stared at his journal. What four memorable conversations had he had? His parents had always been open and honest in talking to him about sex-related stuff, which he realized was not the norm when talking to his friends growing up. It was likely the combination of his mom being a pediatrician and his dad a middle school teacher that equipped his parents with the knack for making Jude feel at ease when talking about his relationships. Jude could always ask questions and get the answers he needed without turning crimson with embarrassment. He felt like he could go to them both with questions, and if they didn't know the answers, they would find out together, at least most of the time.

The Penguin Documentary

Jude got out his journal and pen and wrote *The Penguin Documentary* and then stared at the blank page and remembered one of his first conversations. One of his earliest memories of talking about sex was with his mom when he was around 6 years old. Jude and his parents had always loved watching animal documentaries together. One weekend morning, he and his mom were watching a documentary on South African penguins. There was a specific part where they were filming the penguins' courtship ritual, in which the penguins bow, preen, and call to each other. He remembered seeing the female lie down on the ground and the male climbing on her back. Being a curious child that asked a lot of questions, he turned to his mom and asked, "Why are those two penguins jumping on each other and hugging?" With a grin his mom replied, "What a great question," and then went on to explain animal mating practices, sex, and how penguin babies are born. He remembered being content with her answer, and then asking, "Do you and daddy have sex like penguins?" With a little pause, she said, "Kind of?" and went on to explain that even sex between humans can vary depending on the relationship. He remembered her explaining sex in a simple, yet thoughtful way. Not just explaining how physical body parts work, but also the emotional and relational aspects. He remembered feeling shy and his mom reassured him that talking about sex is nothing to be embarrassed about in their family. She said it is perfectly normal to be curious about sex and his parents are happy to talk about anything with him. He quickly became aware in talking with his friends that most parents were not as open and willing to talk about sex-related topics as his parents. Most of his friends told stories of their parents saying something unhelpful or dismissive when it came to sex-related conversations. He remembered Simon's story of asking his parents when he was younger if his two favorite Power Rangers were a couple and why they never held hands. Simon said his parents scolded, "Because boys don't hold hands with other boys and only girls and boys are couples." Simon said he stopped asking his parents questions after that, because he felt shame and uncertainty about his sexuality. Reflecting, Jude felt lucky to have two parents so willing to talk to him about anything, even sex stuff that can totally be awkward sometimes.

Sex Ed

Jude reminisced on more awkward moments, which seemed to stand out in his mind. Jude wrote the heading *Sex Ed* in his journal. He instantly thought back to middle school and the required “sex education” unit in his health class. It was eighth grade and he had heard rumors of the infamous “sex ed” taught by Mr. Ross and Ms. Anderson. As a 13-year-old he had already had plenty of conversations with his parents about relationships and sex, something he was very aware many of his peers didn’t have at home. He remembered feeling really prepared compared to his friends, but he was not prepared for the ambiguity and weirdness that would ensue over the next week. He remembered on the first day, Ms. Anderson writing a list of topics on the board. At the very top, she wrote “Abstinence is the only 100% effective form of contraception” and underlined it. Twice. Over the course of the next few days, the boys and girls were separated where the boys would watch puberty videos and learn about the male anatomy with Mr. Ross. All the boys giggled whenever the word penis was said. The girls also watched puberty videos and learned about menstruation with Ms. Anderson. At lunch that day Jude’s friend Cassie explained how Ms. Anderson talked about period cramps, bleeding, and how to use menstrual pads while discouraging tampons. Jude’s pal Mike shared with the group how Mr. Ross related being in a relationship to going to an ice cream shop—it is important to try a bunch of the flavors until you find the one you like—along with some ill-timed jokes. Sex ed basically just seemed to cause more confusion than clarity.

On day 4 of the weeklong sex ed course, Ms. Anderson was practically beaming with excitement when students all entered the class. “Good morning, all. Before we start today, does anyone have any questions about what we have learned the past few days?” Silence. “Good, because we have one last movie to watch. It’s called *Birth*, and it is a film about the miracle of childbirth,” she announced. The lights went down and while Jude did not remember everything from the movie, he did remember pubic hair, blood, screaming, and all his classmates squirming. However, most of his memories of this week came from the fifth, and last, day of sex ed. At the start of class, Ms. Anderson and Mr. Ross passed around some blank note cards and a question box. They told everyone to anonymously write a few questions and put them in the box. Jude thought it was a great idea in theory, but what unfolded was extremely unhelpful. After reading some basic questions, Mr. Ross pulled a card and read, “What if I have already had sex? What advice would you give me?” His face turned red. They had just spent the week teaching abstinence is the best and only method of contraception, and now this question. Mr. Ross stumbled over his words and said to not have sex again and then went on to the other questions. He went on to read questions about puberty, oral sex, hormones, love, dating, and masturbation. He gave vague, nondescript, brief answers. Ms. Anderson pulled the last question out of the box and read, “How does a man have safe sex with another man?” Ms. Anderson paused as she looked at the card for what felt like an eternity. Before Ms. Anderson could find her words, the bell cut the class short, and she exhaled deeply.

Jude thought through the questions that filled the hallway the weeks after the infamous sex ed class. He couldn't forget that last question that was never answered. He wondered how lost he would have been as a teen boy if he had only had sex ed in school and not his parents to go to for clarity. He picked up his pen again and remembered baseball camp and the misinformation about sex being tossed around more than the actual baseballs.

Baseball Camp

He wrote, *Baseball Camp* on his paper as he recalled the conversations. It was late June and Jude was in the middle of baseball camp. Luckily, he and his friends got into the same summer league which made the scorching sun more bearable during practice. Misery loves company as they say. Derek, the right fielder, teased Jude, "So you and Sofia are getting serious, how many bases have you rounded with her?" The whole dugout seems to have zeroed in on Derek's question. Simon chimed in from the other side of the dugout, saving Jude from answering. "You've seen him at batting practice; there's no way he's going past second base!" The team laughed and Jude shrugged it off. Derek persisted, "No, seriously, you guys started dating right before Homecoming, you can't tell me you haven't thought about having sex!" Jude shrugged as he searched for his helmet on the rack, he was next up to bat and Derek's questions were the last thing on his mind. Derek added that he'd been dating Ann for 6 months and bought two boxes of condoms so he would have plenty of extras, especially since he'd planned to wear two condoms their first time. "You never can be too careful." Another teammate chimed in, "Are you serious?! That's so dumb, plus I heard you don't even have to worry about getting a girl pregnant if her period is less than 5 days long." Simon replied, rolling his eyes, "That's the furthest thing from the truth! How do you believe that?!" As the dugout erupted about rowdy discussions about who was right and who was wrong, Jude took a few more practice swings before he walked away from the further erupting dugout, thinking to himself how misinformed his friends seemed.

As Simon and Jude were loading their gear in Simon's Red 2003 Honda Accord after camp that day, Simon said, "I know Derek can be a jerk, but maybe we should tell him that he is way off base when it comes to sex. I mean I'm worried he may do something stupid when he has sex." Jude unsurely replies, "I don't know, he'll figure it out, right?" as they got into the car and drove home.

After journaling about his baseball camp experience, he felt a little regret that he didn't talk to Derek. He wondered if it was just dugout and locker room talk; even with the openness of his parents, it's not like he had all the answers.

Jude paused, reflecting on past experiences. A lot had changed since high school baseball camp. He was a senior in college now and while he had a lot more clarity on safer sex practices, navigating relationships was getting more and more complicated. He picked up his pen and wrote, "Casual Confusion?"

Casual Confusion?

It was Halloween night when Jude checked himself in the rearview mirror and wiped away his tears before heading inside his house. He didn't want anyone to know he'd been crying, and he knew Simon would have a million questions about his relationship with Sofia since things had been tense between the two of them lately. Simon was throwing his annual Halloween costume party at their house, and Jude was not in the mood to party. Jude dreaded going inside and facing the sea of happy, laughing, couples' costumes. His whole drive home from Sofia's place, he ran through countless versions of what he wished he would have said to her. After their fight, Sofia suggested they take a break. Jude's words didn't come out right. Very few words came out at all. Why couldn't he explain to Sofia how he felt? He didn't want to be on a break. Jude didn't even know what a "break" meant.

Jude walked into the house and behind the crowd of dinosaurs, princesses, and an inflatable flamingo, he could see Simon in a giant Rubik's cube costume, handing out his famous margaritas. Simon shuffled awkwardly in his cumbersome costume and handed Jude a big glass. "You look like you need something strong." Jude shook his head declining the drink, "I just don't feel like being around people tonight. I'm going to my room." Simon handed off his tray of margaritas and did his best to bring Jude in for a hug through his cardboard box costume. Jude gave a "thank you" wave to his friend who was already disappearing behind a Ketchup and Mustard dressed couple and Jude headed to his room to be alone.

Hours passed as Jude laid in bed and stared at his phone. He ignored the downstairs bustle of the party getting louder as he tried to put his feelings into words to text Sofia. Typing, deleting, re-typing. Was he even allowed to text Sofia if they were on a break? As he continued editing what felt like an impossible text, his door burst open. A woman in a cat costume took two steps in before she turned bright red, "Oh, this isn't the bathroom! I just thought—hey, you're Jude! I remember you from that psychology class we took last semester! I'm Coraline if you don't remember. Why aren't you downstairs at the party?" Jude quickly tossed his phone on his bed, "Oh hey. Yeah, I remember you. Well, I think I got dumped tonight?" The words weren't quite right as they fell out of Jude's mouth. Sophia said "break," but was it a breakup? Coraline beamed as she grabbed Jude's phone, "Lucky me! Now that you're single, here's my number. We can keep it casual." As Coraline handed the phone back, he heard the outgoing message ding from his phone. His unfinished text to Sofia had accidentally been sent. "You look like something is bothering you. You can talk to me." Coraline softened as they both sat on the edge of Jude's bed. "Well . . . it's a long story . . ."

The next morning Simon poured himself a cup of coffee as Coraline skipped down the stairs, through the kitchen wearing Jude's favorite blue baseball sweatshirt. She waved before she was out the front door. Jude walked downstairs a few moments later. Simon handed Jude a mug. "Well you certainly need a cup of your cowboy black coffee to tell me this story! What happened?! Was that Coraline?!" Jude sighs, "It's really not what it looks like! Sofia said we're on a break. Coraline wants to keep it casual, and I have no idea what any of this means. Simon,

help.” “It means, your love life is messier than our house right now.” Jude’s phone buzzed. He looked down to see a message from Coraline, “Had a great time last night. XO.” His screen lit up and buzzed again. A text message from Sofia read, “Can we talk about us?” Jude was confused. How could two relationships become so complicated without really knowing if he was officially in any “relationship” at all?

A Lot to Learn

As Jude put his pen down he realized it had been months since Simon’s Halloween party, and he still didn’t have a clear answer to that question. Jude looked down at his notes:

- The *Penguin Documentary*
- *Sex Ed.*
- *Baseball Camp*
- *Casual Confusion?*

Jude didn’t realize how many messages he had gotten throughout his life about such a personal topic. Before starting his first journal entry, he thought he knew plenty about communicating about sex. His parents talked to him openly, he took sex ed, he talked about sex and relationships with his friends, and he had been in relationships. Jude closed his journal, packed up his gym bag and realized that the *Sexuality and Communication* course might be an elective worth waking up at 9:30 a.m. for. His thoughts were interrupted by the buzz of his phone. Coraline texted for the third time this week. Jude hadn’t answered any of them previously. He read his phone, “Hi Stranger, am I going to see you at Mick’s tonight? I hope so ;)”

Jude started texting back. Before he sent it, he changed his mind, deleting the text and throwing his phone in his back pocket, and headed outside where Simon was waiting to take him to their intramural baseball game. He certainly had a lot to learn in his class on Monday.

For Further Thought and Reflection

1. Which memorable messages/narratives about sex were most ideal/problematic? Why? What are some memorable messages (e.g., interpersonal messages that have a lasting effect on a person’s values, behaviors, and beliefs) about sex-related topics you have received throughout your life? Could you relate to any of the memorable messages or experiences in Jude’s journal?
2. What mixed messages did Jude receive over his lifetime about sex and/or relationships? What, if any, mixed messages have you received about sex-related topics throughout your life?

3. How might Jude's perspective on sex communication be different if he didn't have parents who discussed sex-related topics openly? What role do you think parents/guardians play in talking with their children about sex?
4. You read about Jude's experience in sex ed class. What was your experience, if any, with sex education in school?
5. How do Jude's relationships (e.g., parents, teachers, classmates, Simon, Derek, Sofia, Coraline, etc.) impact his experience with sex communication? What impact does sex communication have on the self and relationships?
6. Jude was confused about the status of his ambiguous relationship(s) with Sofia and Coraline. How could Jude go about clarifying these relationships? What would those conversations look like?

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