

# Intimate Dialogues

Navigating Conversations on Sexuality in Couples





# A Brief Overview



- Discuss and explore sexuality in intimate relationships
- Develop more confidence initiating and holding sexual conversations
- Look at some practical strategies and frameworks
- Reflect on personal attitudes and ethical considerations



# A Brief Overview



## Why This Matters?

- Sexuality is a key aspect of relational wellbeing
- Can be under-discussed in therapy rooms and yet is often in the therapeutic field
- Discomfort, avoidance, and lack of training



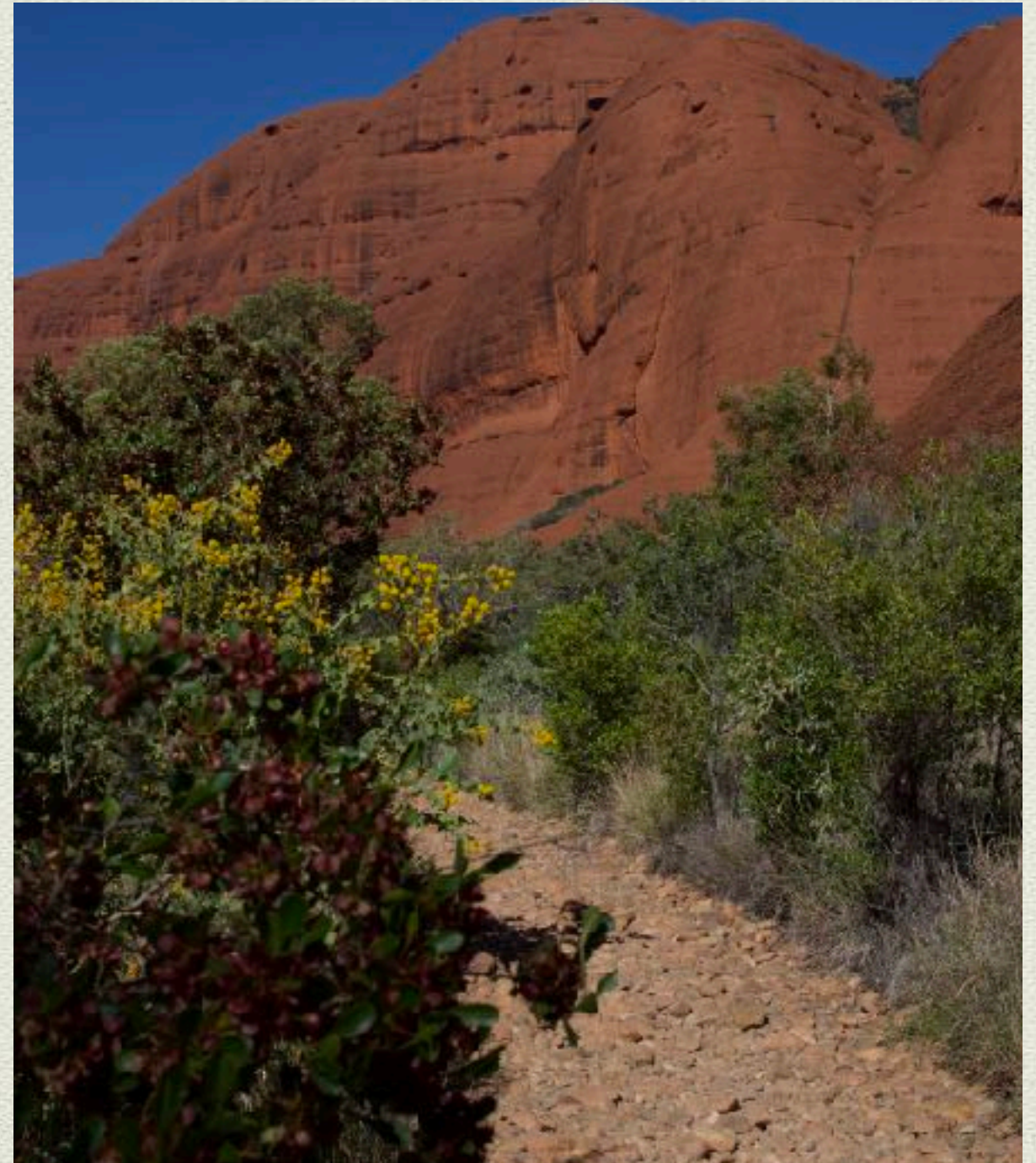
# Exercise



## **Self Reflection:**

What are messages/beliefs you received/have about sex?

How do these show up (or you imagine they will) in your therapy practice?





# Sexuality in Relationships



## **Cultural & Social Influences**

- Heteronormativity and gender roles
- Porn, Social Media & the internet
- LGBTQIA+ and diverse sexual expressions
- Religion and differing cultural norms
- Aging & Ability

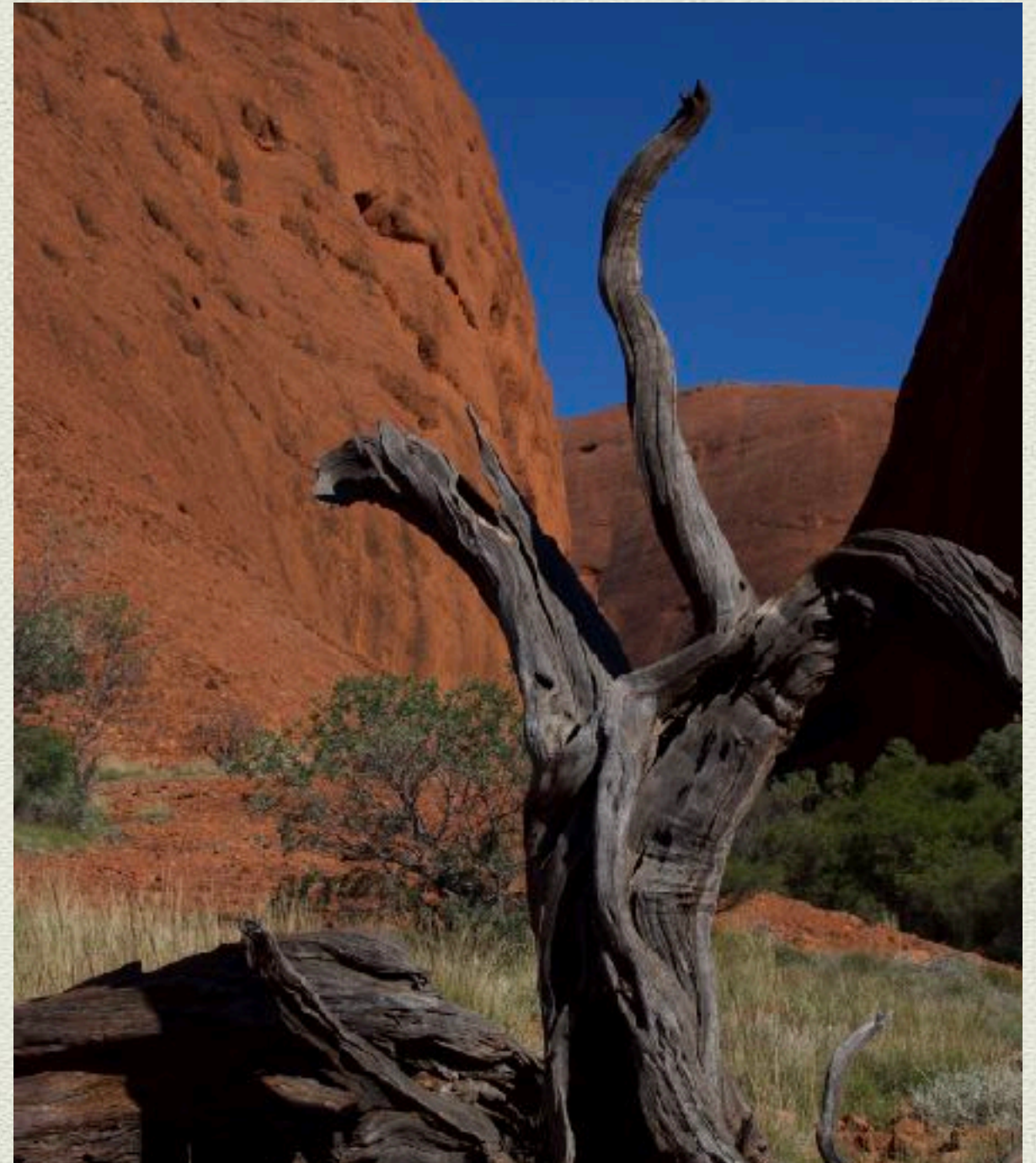


# Exercise



What are some of the **core expression** of sexuality in relationship?

*Eg Desire, love, power..*





# Sexuality in Relationships



## Core Expression of Sexuality in Relationships

- Desire and intimacy
- Power and vulnerability
- Attachment and safety
- Conflict and repair cycles

*Are there others you think of...*



# Sexuality in Relationships



**Couples are often seeking...**

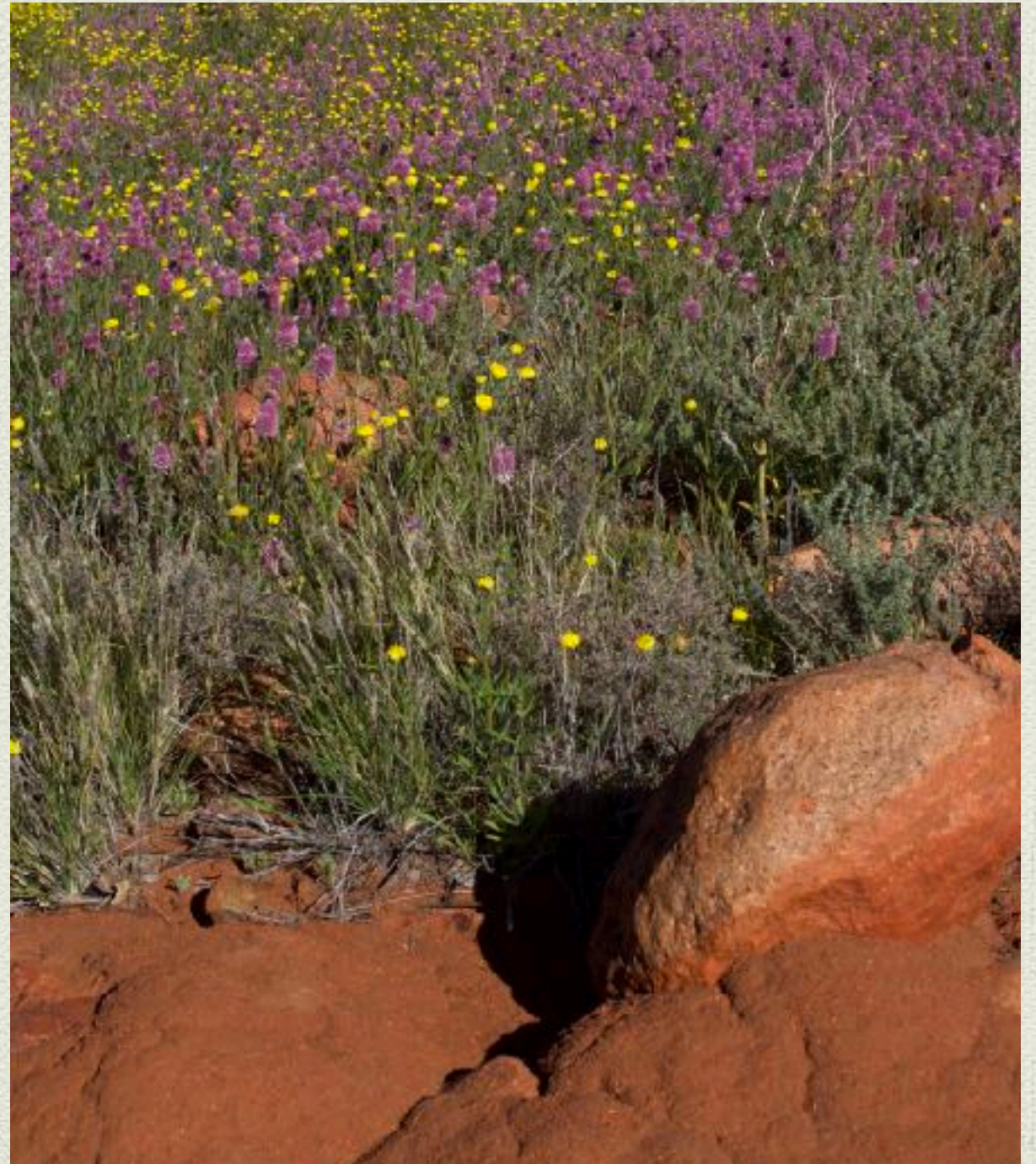
A shift away from performative, outcome-focused sex and toward attuned, sensory, sexual connection with emotional presence.

*What would happen if we took intercourse and orgasm out of the equation?*



# Exercise

What are **common presentations** around Sex in relationships?





# Sexuality in Relationships



## **Common Presentations:**

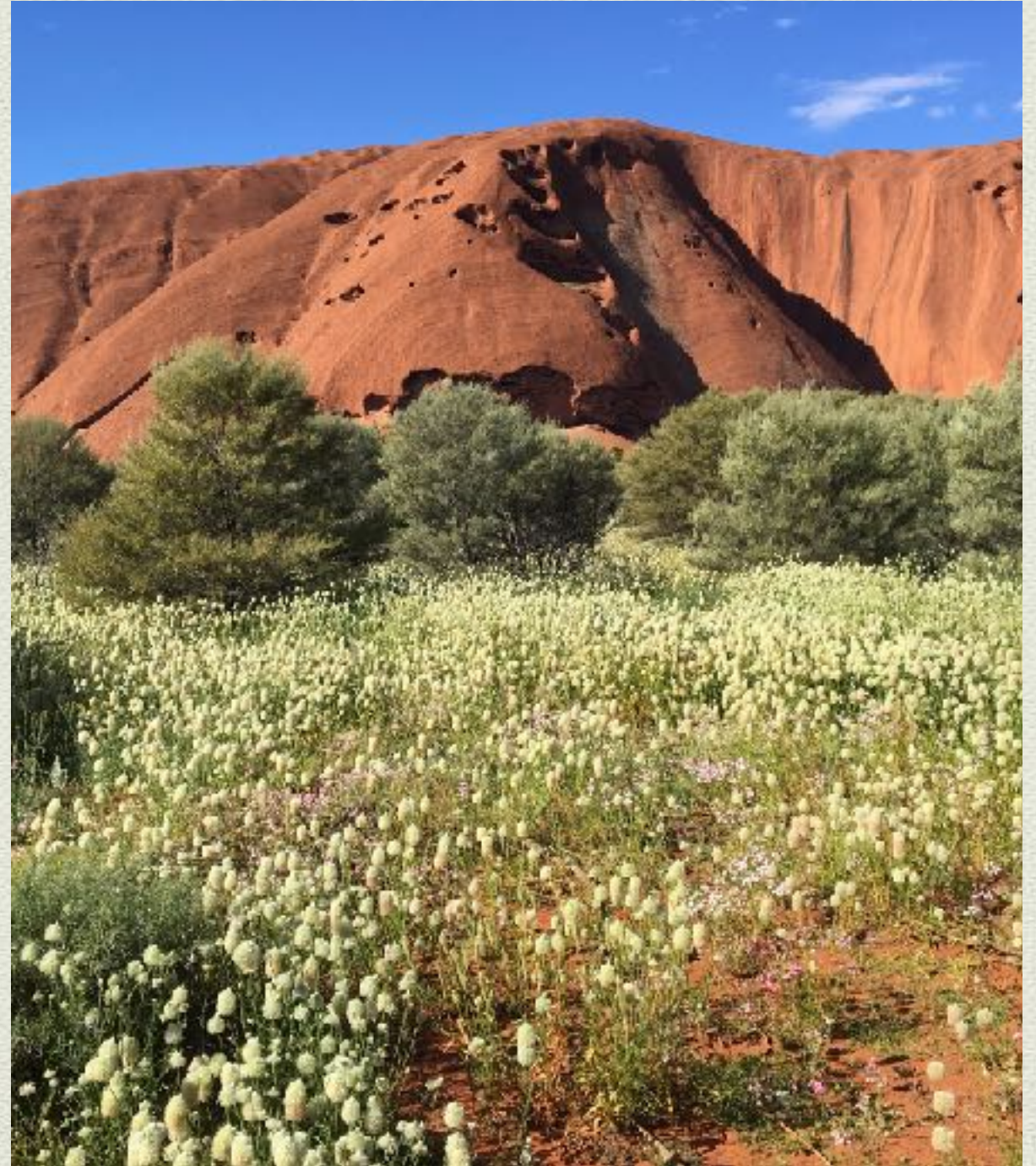
- Sexual trauma resurfacing in intimacy
- Mismatched libidos or preferences
- Lack of sexual connection after parenting
- Sexless relationships
- Performance anxiety or dysfunctions
- Porn Addiction (current or historical)

*What Others Can you think of...*



# Exercise

What ground do we need,  
in our practice, to **hold**  
**sexual conversations** with  
safety and confidence??





# Supporting Practice



- Consider safety in the relationship for sexual conversation
- Discerning Emotional intimacy vs. sexual intimacy
- Normalise sexuality discussions early in the therapy
- Having a **therapeutic framework** for understanding sexuality in relationships
- Maintain a non-judgmental stance and check your biases
- Have good referral pathways



# A Therapy Framework



## Gestalt Therapy:

- **Phenomenology** – Attuning to what is present in the moment: sensation, awareness, and meaning of sexual experience
- **Dialogic Relationship** – Meeting the client with presence and mutuality; exploring how sexuality is co-created in the relational field
- **Field Theory** – Considering the broader relational, cultural, and environmental context of sexual beliefs and expression
- **Experimentation** – Using embodied, experiential methods to help clients try new ways of engaging with desire, expression, and boundaries.

*Which of the **pillars** do you feel most drawn to (or challenged by) when considering working with sexuality in therapy?*



# A Therapy Framework



## Gina Ogden's 4-Dimensional Wheel

- Encourages exploration across four dimensions of sexual experience:
  - **Physical** – sensation, touch, pleasure
  - **Emotional** – connection, safety, vulnerability
  - **Mental** – beliefs, stories, judgments
  - **Spiritual/Energetic** – meaning, sacredness, vitality
- Invites understanding of sexuality beyond performance or dysfunction
- Uses tools like breathwork, ritual, and mindful dialogue



# A Therapy Framework



## Esther Perel – Reigniting Desire in Long-Term Relationships

- Explores the **tension between love and desire**: love seeks closeness; desire needs space
- Long-term intimacy requires balancing **security with eroticism**, familiarity with novelty
- Encourages couples to become curious about each other again—“erotic intelligence”
- Emphasises **play, imagination, and risk** as vital elements of sustaining attraction
- Sex is not just a physical act but a place of meaning, identity, and emotional truth



# A Therapy Framework



## Betty Martin – The 3-Minute Game

- A structured touch-based exercise that clarifies giving and receiving between partners.
- Based on two key questions:
  - “What do you want me to do to you for 3 minutes?”
  - “What would you like to do to me for 3 minutes?”
- Explores dynamics of consent, desire, and boundary-setting
- Helps partners understand and express their wants, limits, and capacity
- Builds embodied communication, trust, and sexual agency



# A Therapy Framework



## **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)**

- Explore the emotional bonding and attachment needs underlying sexual disconnection
- Identify and de-escalate negative cycles that block intimacy
- Create moments of vulnerability and responsiveness between partners
- Helps couples experience sex as an expression of emotional safety and closeness



# A Therapy Framework



## **Gottman Method – Rituals of Connection:**

- Develop daily or weekly rituals that foster connection and intimacy
- Examples: parting and reunion rituals, check-ins, affection ritual
- Support couples to reconnect emotionally and erotically through predictability and intention
- Helps maintain intimacy even through periods of stress, conflict, or routine



# A Therapy Framework



## Sensate Focus

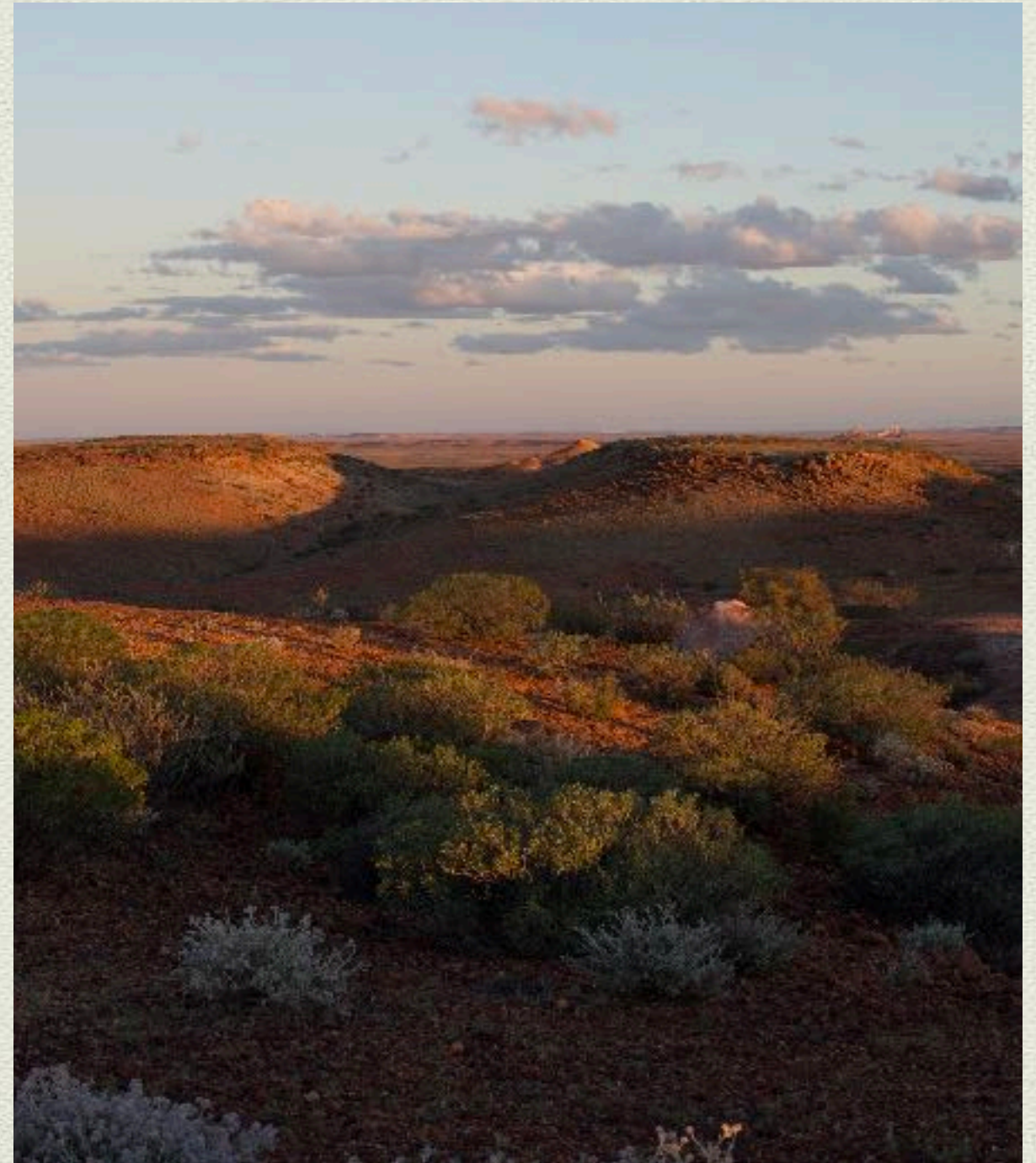
- Developed by Masters & Johnson as a non-demand, body-based method for rebuilding intimacy
- Shifts focus from performance and outcome to sensory connection
- Key elements:
  - Present-moment, mindful touch without expectations
  - Begins with non-genital contact and gradually increases intimacy
  - Encourages mutual pleasure and emotional safety
  - Supports healing from anxiety, trauma, or disconnection
  - Useful for couples rebuilding physical connection after life transitions



# Exercise



What **ethical edge** have you **encountered** (or feared) when discussing sex in therapy?





# Ethical Consideration



## **Ethical Considerations**

- The therapist's presence in safe, phenomenological inquiry and boundaried, therapeutic holding
- Handling disclosures with professionalism and integrity
- Consent and pacing in deep or charged sexual conversations
- Respecting clients' right to privacy, agency, and non-disclosure
- Documentation considerations for sexual content in clinical notes

*What Others Can you think of...*



# Ethical Considerations



## **Avoiding Pathology of Sexuality**

- Understanding the wide spectrum of sexual norms and expressions
- Working from a sex-positive, inclusive, and shame-reducing stance
- Recognising unconscious bias around kink, non-monogamy, and sexual frequency
- Not mistaking sexual difference for dysfunction
- Acknowledging and working with cultural and generational norms



# Ethical Considerations



## **Therapist Boundaries, Triggers & Self-Care**

- Managing transference and countertransference around sex and intimacy
- Noticing when your own sexual values or history are activated
- Knowing when to refer or seek supervision
- Developing rituals for grounding and self-check-ins
- Prioritising supervision and ongoing education in sex and relationship therapy



# Exercise

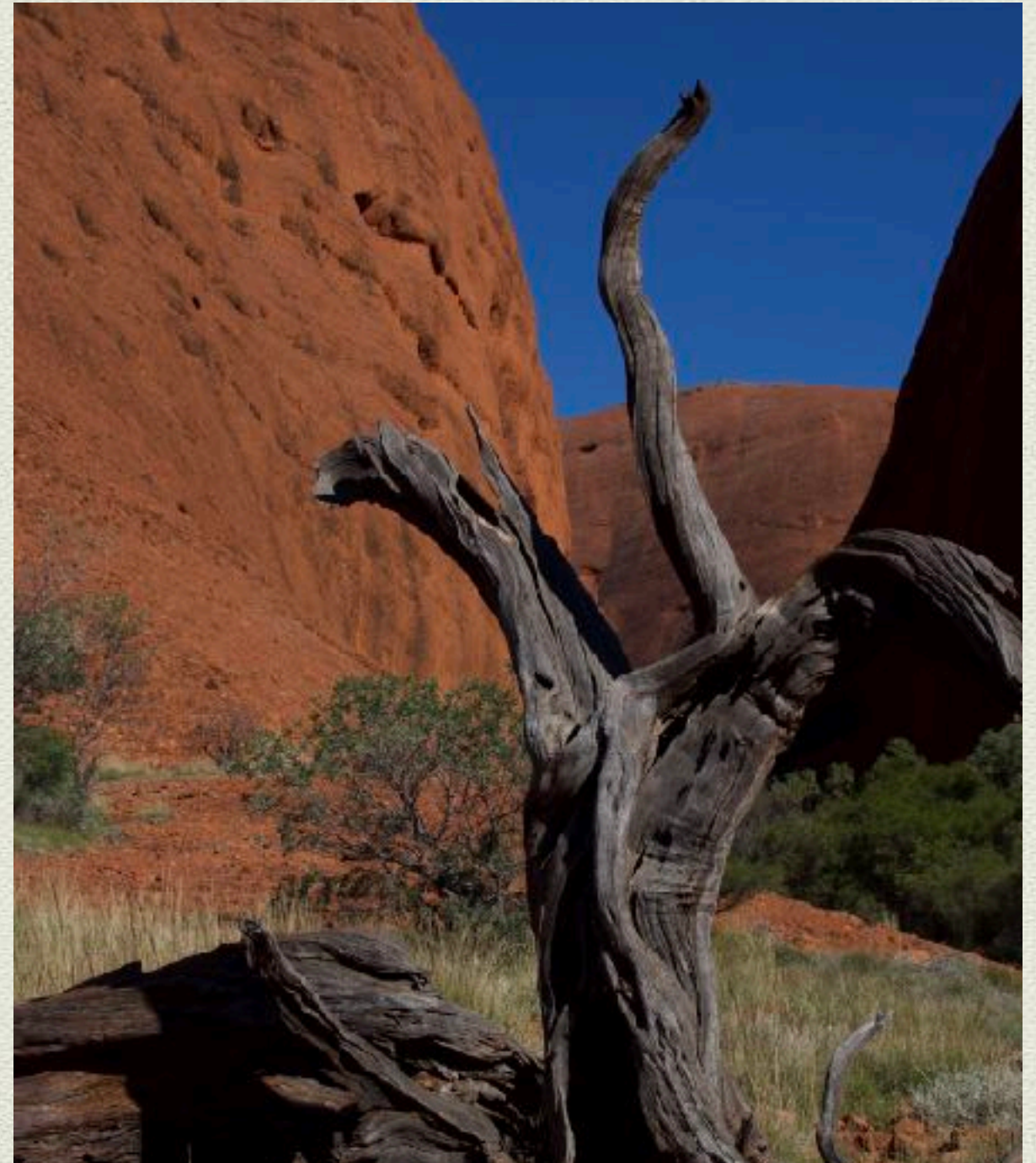


What is **one or two insight or shifts** you want to carry into your clinical practice?

*What resonated with you most?*

*What conversations are you more willing to invite or hold?*

*How might you begin introducing sexual dialogue with clients?*





*"Eroticism thrives in the space between the self and the other. It's about bridging separateness. It's a creative act of engaging mystery, not solving a problem."*

- Ester Perel



# Most Importantly



Look out for...

Vicarious Trauma  
Compassion Fatigue  
Burn out

*be good to yourself*

