



Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 12
“COVID and Dating: Feb 2021 UPDATE”
February 25, 2021

What's the state of dating during COVID now? Get the lowdown. We follow up with Sarah Sloane on dating and hookups a year into the pandemic and get tips you can use. Plus, Karen's Sermon on the Pubic Mound on staying steady in hard times.

Host: Karen Yates

Guests: Sarah Sloane, Tazima Parris

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Sarah Sloane

I think it's going to be really interesting, because the impulse is that we're all going to just go hog wild and go crazy when we've all got our vaccines, and have all the sex with all the peoples, and all the dates, and all of the hookups. And I love that impulse. That's a great impulse. I don't think that's the reality.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates.

Today, we check in about what's happening in the dating scene now with COVID, plus my Sermon on the Pubic Mound® on staying steady. Keep listening.

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Hey, folks. Seven months ago, for our very first episode, I conducted a lively panel discussion with therapist Matthew Amador, sex coach Tazima Parris, and sex educator Sarah Sloane about COVID and getting laid, one of our most popular episodes to date. Well, I decided to return to that topic today. Even though the vaccine is slowly rolling out, and I'm seeing some people reviving their online dating profiles, a lot of people are still offline. The mood is sort of hopeful, but kind of muddled. So I thought I'd bring back a guest from that first episode, Sarah Sloane, who has been on the pod a ton since then, and is also the marketing and communications director of the dating app #open, for nonmonogamous people and their partners. She'll be walking us through what she's seeing in the dating landscape today. You'll be hearing a couple of cuts from our first episode too. Enjoy.

Hey, Sarah Sloane. Welcome.

Sarah Sloane

Hello, it is lovely to see you and hear your voice again.

Karen Yates

Oh, likewise, likewise. It's been a while.

Sarah Sloane

How's that pandemic going for you?

Karen Yates

It's just rolling along. Like a thunderball, if we can make a James Bond reference.

Sarah Sloane

Brilliant. That's a brilliant reference, and perfect.

Karen Yates

So here we are. You were on our very first episode among many, but you were on the very first episode with Tazima Parris and Matthew Amador, where we discussed COVID and dating, COVID getting laid. Now it is six and a half months later. Yeah. We recorded that episode late July. Now we are mid-February. Did any of us realize it was going to go on this long, and get even deeper? I don't think so. So here you are, you are the director of marketing and communications with #open. And so my question to you, from the professional side of it is, what changes are you seeing in dating profiles or dating conversations in general?

Sarah Sloane

It has been really interesting to me that the number of people who are engaging has actually gone up since we talked in July. People initially, I think, shut down, you know, just like the rest of our culture. Everything shut down because we were really nervous. I'm visualizing like that record scratch moment. As we were talking in July, we were talking about, there are ways for you to reduce your risk, here are some of the things that we now know about this virus. I think we're starting to realize that we weren't going to be able to stay shut down forever. And we were having to think about what we could do to get those touch needs met, and get those interconnection needs met. And now we're six and a half months later. And what we know is that this is still a deadly virus. But we now know that there are more issues with it — long-haul syndrome. We know that there are potential mutations. So I think there's still, even though we know more, there's still a lot of uncertainty. And as we've kind of seen culturally, there's this tension between, "Everybody get out now, just live your life, it'll be fine," and, "Oh my god, we can't get out safely right now." And the tenor of that has changed. But I think that that tension is still omnipresent for us. The other thing that I've seen is, I've seen a lot of people who have kind of taken the bull by the horns, as it were, and been very specific in their dating profiles about, "I have got a vaccine." I've started noticing people who said, "I've been vaccinated," "I have antibodies," I see people very clearly laying out, "This is what I am looking for, this is the pacing." So I'm definitely seeing, in a sex-positive app, it's probably a little bit more prevalent, or a little bit more noticeable than a mainstream app, because we are a group of people who are more used to having STI conversations and more used to having harm reduction and risk-awareness conversations, if we're engaging in kink. On the other hand, I do still see people who are saying, like, "I'm looking for a hookup tonight." And I think that again, it goes back to that tension between what our impulses tell us we really need in order to kind of self soothe, or get our touch needs met and, you know, prevailing attitudes of maintaining around safe space.

Karen Yates

You know, I talked to a friend who's down in Florida, and he was saying — he moved down there from Chicagoland area — and he's saying that, like, there's very little, in the part of Florida he's in, there's very little in the way of, you know, mask-wearing. And so it's a regional thing too. You know, there's just swaths of the country that are not engaging in the same dialogues. And you probably are seeing that too.

Sarah Sloane

Yeah, absolutely. People who are in areas that have been hit more heavily — major cities, particularly the greater New York area, folks who are in Los Angeles and San

Francisco, folks who are here in Chicago, people who are in areas where mask-wearing has become the norm, and people who are in areas where there's a lot of conversation about community spread, I think are having those conversations much more easily. And maybe that's a reflection on, you know, how we're having those conversations with our friends and our family in our everyday life. And transitioning those over to kind of like the dating sorts of connections we're looking at. I am absolutely delighted to see so many people who now have pictures of them wearing their masks in their profiles. The number of people wearing face masks in their #open profiles is actually pretty, pretty large. And I actually love seeing it, because when I see somebody's dating profile, and they have a picture of them wearing their mask, it tells me that they're at least being mindful of the health issues that are surrounding us. And I am going to personally feel a little bit more confident having a conversation with that person that includes "This is what my needs are in terms of COVID prevention."

Karen Yates

Yeah, I mean, there is something really great about the "picture is worth a thousand words." And you know, the picture does convey so much. And I agree, if you see someone wearing a mask, that's going to send a message, just like if you see them in kink wear, that's going to send a message.

I'll return to my interview with Sarah Sloane in a moment. Things are heating up in The Afterglow, our members-only club on Patreon. A rotating panel of experts answer members' anonymous sex, kink, and relationship questions in a monthly audio bonus session. Plus, I've added a new feature: Creator Notes. Every week, I give folks my unedited thoughts and additional background on the pod episode that week, and until February 28 — three more days — all new and existing members can select one ebook from the SinCyr erotic literature catalog for a free download. More fun bonuses are being planned. Levels start at just \$5 a month, and can be changed at any time. What are you waiting for? The link to The Afterglow is in our show notes. And now, back to our interview with Sarah Sloane from the dating app #open.

Where do you see this all going? Can you look into your special magic ball, Sarah? What I wonder about is, as vaccines become more prevalent — and right now, I think I was looking at the New York Times front page, in the front part of their app today, and I think it said 8% of the US has gotten their first shot, and two or three percent have had both of their shots. Have you seen language around, "Hey, if you haven't gotten a vaccine yet, I don't want to be with you"? Do you see more hardline verbiage? Do you think that's the way it's gonna go in the future?

Sarah Sloane

I think that that is going to be a very clear metric that a number of people are going to be using. We're noticing that some sex parties and kink parties have started back up — or are continuing, sadly. But I would not be at all surprised if they say, "You need to have proof of a vaccine, or documentation of why you can't have one in order to participate." I absolutely think that that's the case. You know, when you're talking about looking into the crystal ball, I think it's going to be really interesting, because the impulse is that we're all going to just go buck wild, and hog wild, and go crazy when we've all got our vaccines, and have all the sex with all the people, and all the dates and all the hookups. And I love that impulse, that's a great impulse. I don't think that's the reality. Because those of us who have been living under the shadow of trying to maintain our safety for so long, I think putting us in positions where suddenly we're back out, we're gonna have a reaction to it. We're gonna have almost like a little bit of a skittishness, or a little bit of a fear about being around people. I've noticed it, you know, being around people that I know are totally cool. I've had, I think, two people in my house other than my partner since the pandemic started. And both of those times, even though it was something that was a very lengthy negotiation, and we had communicated very clearly about safety levels and testing, I had a reaction to it. I felt my body kind of go like, "Wait, is this okay? Is this safe?" So I would imagine that what we're going to be looking at is a little bit of challenge of navigating our own trauma around having had to be so hyper-vigilant, and how we're going to relax that appropriately for ourselves, and neither shove ourselves into behavior that doesn't feel safe for us, and not take those steps out at the same time.

Karen Yates

Right. I'm gonna play some segments here...

Tazima Parris

[previously recorded] About this being a lifestyle thing: If you are engaging with someone who you haven't had that conversation with, you're not going to feel safe. If you feel like they did something that you was, you know, they went off last weekend with their friends and went to a place and you knew they weren't wearing masks, and you're not going to talk about it, because it feels uncomfortable, you're not even going to be able to enjoy the intimacy that you're having with the person, because that's going to be on your mind. So do yourself a favor and communicate this stuff. Make sure that the person is matching your lifestyle, so that you can relax into it, once you actually do get down to whatever kind of sexual engagement you're going to be having.

Sarah Sloane

[previously recorded] One of the first things that I'm actually asking people to do is separate from that need to figure out what your minimum acceptable level of risk is. Like, you have got to know what is going to feel okay for you before you go into any conversation about it. If you have a pre-existing condition, if you have risk factors, make sure that you're confident about what you're going to need in order to feel safe. It's the same that we — you know, this is one place where it is similar to having an STI conversation. It's like, what level of risk is acceptable to you? The situations that I've seen that have kind of blown up are when people are trying to reverse-engineer. It becomes a very rejection-fear kind of a process. And I think that being able to own your stuff and be strong in it is such a challenge for so many people. You know, a lot of us were brought up not to believe that we had the right to boundaries. But this is one of those times where us spending the time figuring out what's going to be okay, and being able to then lead the conversations with that... It really is about knowing yourself and advocating for yourself, right from the start.

Karen Yates

[back in the present timeline] So, to Tazima's point, and your point just now: It's like, I anticipate even more complexity in communication, as we maybe come outside to play, you know, come out of the safety of our abodes and start meeting up with people in person. And communication is already hard enough as it is. I know in the first episode, several of you talked about the quicker you get things out in the open, the better it is. I think that still stands. But talk to me a little bit about navigating the communication with all of these things now in play. You know, now we all have access to testing. Soon we'll start having more access to vaccines. Is it more important than ever to know our bottom lines?

Sarah Sloane

I think it is just as important as ever. The challenge that I see is that what is safe is still really squishy for people. And we saw this happen around the holidays. I will totally own the fact that my Facebook and social media bubbles tend to be people who are very, very concerned about not participating in the spread of illness. And so, the ways that we were all handling seeing pictures of family members or friends that were visiting with family for indoor holiday celebrations was, it was challenging, because these are people that we have ongoing relationships with, that we would have thought, "Oh, you should see this as serious as I do." And regardless of — there's no right on that. You know, that was a case of assumptions about what it meant to behave in a way that was safe and healthy. We're up against the wall. You know, one person is, "I'm not exposing myself to anything, because I'm only going out to eat in restaurants

where there's social distancing," versus another person who says, "My health is so significant a concern for me to maintain that I'm not leaving my house." So we really have to get down to: What do you mean by that? You know, initially, it was like, we had some questions to ask. Now, we actually know that the ways that it's spread are actually a lot easier in some ways than we thought they were. The conversation now, at this point in time, of double-masking — you know, we have to get really serious about, okay, what do you mean by 'you're behaving in a way that's safe'? What is an acceptable level of risk for you? And it's still important to have those conversations, I think. Just the ways that we know now that we need to have them are different.

Karen Yates

Yeah, it's interesting, I was just reading about how, I don't know the story or report, they did a study about rate of transmission, say in taxis, Ubers and Lyfts. And like, most people don't even think, because it's so ubiquitous, that this is one way. So there's all sorts of things about how to position the windows, up or down, and, you know, airflow — "ye olde airflow conversation"... But I love what you're saying. Because the idea of safety is so different from person to person. One thing I was wondering, because I love your your story about the holidays and seeing pictures and having a strong opinion with your cohort on everything, is: Do you think — like, say in terms of a dating app — you know, there's always people you're like, "Absolutely yes," "Absolutely no," and then there's the amorphous "maybe" pile. Do you think there is going to be more clear-cut yes-no, and less people in that "maybe," based on the whole culture we're in right now?

Sarah Sloane

That's a great question. It's hard to say, because we've had so many other things in the last year, in addition to COVID, that have created more of a polarization. People who might have been squishy on their political needs are no longer squishy on their political needs. People that may have been squishy on your stance on racism, or your stance on, you know, police — like, we have kind of as a culture moved away from the middle, in a lot of ways. And so I think that — will there be more people in the middle? I don't think so. I think it's very comfortable for people right now to be very much like, "Yes or no. What is your opinion on this?" Do I think that that's going to be really concerning for people, especially people who are dipping their toes into the dating world? Or who are just kind of coming back to dating apps, because they're starting to feel safe? Yeah, I think that's going to be really challenging.... Yeah.

Karen Yates

Is that beneficial, to be polarized, when looking for a potential— let's just say, not hookup, but a potential partner?

Sarah Sloane

Mm hmm. [pause] There are two warring things that I'm thinking. One is that, in relationships, it's really critical that we feel honored and respected by our partners. And so that means that we need to choose partners who we can bring ourselves, all of our selves to the table, and feel like we're going to be — even if they don't agree with us, that they're going to respect our value as a human being, and that they're going to respect our voice. And so in that sense, is it a good idea to have your hard limits? Absolutely. On the other hand, in relationships, one of the greatest skills that we can have is the skill of negotiation and compromise. So there's a little bit of a warring kind of idea in my head. I think, what I would like is if people pick the lines and the boundaries that they need to pick, yeah. And as an example, for me, do I feel really comfortable getting together with somebody who is living in a cohousing situation where there are 12 people? Probably not right now. Could we potentially negotiate something? Sure. Do I feel comfortable with somebody who ideologically does not think that something is important that I think is critical? Okay, now we've got a problem. You know, because if they don't see the value in something that I hold really dear, then it's probably not going to be a good fit. So I think it's: pick the things that are really important to you. And then allow some room for some of that compromise. But again, what is the value that is important? The value that's important is that you feel heard, honored and respected.

Karen Yates

Right. Yeah, it's interesting. I had that illuminated — you know, I think sometimes you don't know until you walk through it, right? Until you get a response, and you're like, wuuuht? You know? And you know, right? I mean, I've been out with people. And when the subject of climate change comes up, and I'm happy to put it out there, that I believe climate change is real, and I care deeply about it, and I want to be part of the solution. And if I get an answer that is different than that... The first time it happened, I literally felt like — it was almost like the bottom fell out, like, of my body. It's hard to even describe. I was like, "Are you serious?" And I mean, I watched myself have this reaction, but it was really important. I was like, "Oh, I see. This is like, this is like a bottom line."

Sarah Sloane

Yeah.

Karen Yates

I mean, I was kind of in this assumptive place that like, well, everyone's sort of like on board with this, right? Well, no, that's absolutely not true. We know that's not true. But for me, this is important. So, however we can get in touch with these bottom lines for ourselves is really important.

Sarah Sloane

One of the activities that I love to do when I'm doing private coaching with folks who are trying to figure out their relationship structures, or who are looking at ways to kind of make great choices, I have them do a thing where we basically call out what the values that person has. And it's not as simple as that, as you would think. You know, it's like everybody says: honesty is important. Everybody says, trust is important. We all like, of course, everybody has all the values, you know, like, yeah, you. However, the process of figuring out what those core values are, is an absolute revelation for a lot of people to realize. Like, oh, actually, when it's placed between honesty and compassion, which of those is more important? Nobody wants to make that choice. But it's a great exercise for people, because it allows you to figure out, "No, really, this is what is critical." And I think that expanding — like, I'm a big believer in: know what your values are, because those values are going to be what leads and guides all the rest of the decisions that you make. And if my value is honesty, and I chat with somebody, and they're clearly withholding information from me that I need, that's my red flag, right? My red flag, it isn't about COVID. It isn't about the fact that they went to their mom's house for the Super Bowl party with 15 other people. The bottom line for me is they did not tell me the truth about it. So you know, coming at it from a values-led standpoint makes it a lot easier to figure out what those hard lines are, and why they're there.

Karen Yates

Yeah, I think that way about authenticity. It's like, oh, if you can't tell people that you're this way, that this is your sexual life, or, you know... within reason, of course. But like, if you have to have a lot of masking going on...

Sarah Sloane

Yeah,

Karen Yates

...That's important information for me.

Sarah Sloane

Yeah. I think that we're gonna have to live in this squishy place. Like in a sense, most of us have been in a lockdown mode, to some extent or the other, for the past year now. And we are coming to a time where we're not going to be anymore. You know, whether we like it or not, our worlds are gonna have to expand. We're gonna have vaccines that are gonna become more prevalent, we're going to have, you know, schools are starting to open back up on smaller levels, like, we're going to be able to have choices about going out to a restaurant for a birthday party. We haven't had those choices, really, for the last year. Suddenly, we're going to start having those again. And I think that, as we move into that space of uncertainty — that, you know, like, we're gonna be able to use those boundaries and those values as kind of like our compass points, to figure out like, how are we going to navigate the channel of this? As a person who engages in ethical nonmonogamy, and who has a partner who has more partners than I do, I am going to say that I thought — I would have bet money — that I was in great shape to go through this. And the reality is that this has really challenged me in ways that I didn't anticipate. And I think it has created a much stronger relationship for the partner that I have been spending time with during this, because we've had to navigate this sort of pseudo-monogamy initially, before we could figure out how to create some safe space for him to see other partners. So I think that this is not going to be comfortable. And it's okay, that it's not comfortable. You know, it's like, I think sometimes we, particularly in sex-positive communities, we have this idea that we can't talk about things that are uncomfortable, because there's something wrong with it being uncomfortable. And the reality is: if you find this comfortable, I don't know, you, I really don't. And so, I'm reminding myself to let myself live in a space where the discomfort is real. And I'm able to create the intimacy with my partner, and the trust part of that intimacy, to be able to kind of go like, "This really sucks, and I have this feeling, and that's in opposition to the values of our relationship. And I want to navigate this." Because otherwise, you're cheating yourself. And you're cheating a relationship out of what could be a moment of transformative intimacy. So that's the thing that I have really come to terms with: the fact that 20 years of being ethically nonmonogamous, and I knew nothing about how to live through a pandemic with a partner. Yeah, it's like, it does not matter how fucking evolved you are. It just doesn't. COVID don't care! [laughter]

Karen Yates

Oh, my God. Yeah. Yep. I'm sure even the Dalai Lama has had stressful times in the past year.

Sarah Sloane

You know, I have a picture that I keep — somebody shared it online. And as somebody who is Buddh-ish, I love it. And it's a—

Karen Yates

Can you be Buddh-ish, and monogamish? I like that. Buddhish and monogamish. Yeah.

Sarah Sloane

You can be as -ish as you want to. Bring all your issues to the table. Yes, that's good. But it has this Buddhist monk who's walking past a truck in traffic, and is flipping the truck off. And I'm like, you know, we can think that we can do shit as great as we can, and we may be 100% right in a perfect world or in a normal world. You know, I also have a saying, somewhere up in my office, that says "Even Jesus flipped the tables." You know, it's like, don't let your idea of who you are at your best stop you from acknowledging who you are in the moments of trauma, because nobody is supposed to get through this with bright shining faces. And so like, let yourself be messy.

Karen Yates

Yeah. That's, that's great. I appreciate it. [laughs] Oh, man, thanks so much, Sarah. Love talking with you.

Sarah Sloane

Absolutely. It's always a pleasure.

Karen Yates

To find out more about #open, go to our show notes. And be sure to check out our first episode. There are some great strategies for navigating these times that are still quite useful. We have the link to that episode in our show notes. Wild & Sublime is also sponsored in part by our Sublime Supporter, Chicago-based Full Color Life Therapy, therapy for all of you, at fullcolorlifetherapy.com. If you would like to be a Sublime Supporter, showcasing you and your business and supporting us at the same time, contact us at info@wildandsublime.com. And now it's time for my Sermon on the Pubic Mound.

So in Episode 1, I included a Sermon from the very last Wild & Sublime live show, March 13, 2020, just as COVID officially hit Chicago and everything began shutting down. In that Sermon, I talked about how things were going to get weird, and how we needed to have compassion for each other, and assume the best and reach out. That's still valid. And a lot has happened since March 13. For some people in the midst of this

chaos, there's been some benefit, a time to work things out and get clear. I myself put this podcast together from the live show, which was a great change. And some of you might not know that I'm also a healer who does energy work with sound. And I began doing group sessions online every week. The work has deepened and expanded in ways it couldn't have without this crisis. But that's not the point. Because now, even as vaccines begin to be distributed, there are disturbing stories about young people and their now tenuous mental health. Other stories, about the marked increase in eating disorders and addictions among the general population, the feeling rising up of complete despair for people, especially singles, who have not been allowed legally in many countries to even meet. People who are cut off from basic human touch, from community, or from the sense, which usually happens when we come together in groups, of belonging and purpose. I myself wonder if some of my relationships will survive. The relationships that relied on easy habit, live social interaction, or grabbing a meal every couple of months. Those are gone, in hibernation. Will they come back? I don't know. Because, as I continue to turn my attention to myself, stop the doomscrolling and do what's in front of me to stay balanced, I, by necessity, need to gravitate to the relationships that are sustaining me ongoingly. This is not forever. We are so close to the end of this. Maybe a good handful of months. Make the most loving choices you can for yourself, and keep going.

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

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