

## **'Although we find it hard to believe, young people still prioritise personal encounters over digital ones'**

EMAIZE Centro Sexológico will be delivering the course titled "**Erotika 3.0: When at Puberty Cybersex, Sexting and Intimacy Become Pornography**". We have spoken with **Ane Ortíz Ballesteros**, who will be in charge of delivering the course.

### **How has the lockdown affected the use of digital technologies and social media?**

The exceptional times we have experienced have only accelerated the unstoppable digitization process. In a matter of weeks, many aspects of our lives changed without us practically realising. Who hasn't made a video call using Whatsapp, Telegram, Zoom, Meet or similar platforms during the lockdown? We have had to work, study and even receive health care through digital channels. We have had to adapt hastily to a digital scenario with all that entails.

### **And what has been the impact of this new scenario on younger generations and what dangers does it entail?**

One of the big changes has been in the use of mobile phones. The latest publications on the use of social media by young people, at state level, confirm an upward trend. Social media usage has grown by 55 per cent in recent months while Internet consumption has increased by 75 per cent over a year.

The main forms of violence to which children are exposed in the digital sphere are related to sexual harassment, the dissemination of private images, male violence, cyber-bullying or the incitement of harmful behaviours.

However, a technology ban is not the solution. It is about educating and supporting young people, now more than ever, in the safe and responsible use of these technologies. It is also essential to educate to encourage respect for diversity and to promote violence-free relations at all levels. After all, the digital plane is still the reflection of the behaviour that occurs in the analogue plane, with small differences, which can quickly amplify the impact of our acts.

### **Have all these changes also affected the way we hook up?**

Absolutely. Far from what one might think, the use of dating apps has increased by up to 94 per cent among people under the age of 35. Tinder, Wapa (for girls) and Grindr (for boys) have been the most widely downloaded applications in recent months.

Likewise, cybersex has gone from being another option to being the only alternative to shared erotic relations during the lockdown. Therefore, we believe that this is here to stay.

If we think about it carefully, this way of relating causes less anxiety than traditional dating. We have a "panic button" we can use to disappear if we do not feel at ease or if we feel in danger. The fact that penetration is impracticable encourages you to rethink lovemaking by removing coitus from the equation. Similarly, traditional "dangers" such as genital-transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies disappear, so we can have a false feeling of safety. However, other risks arise from this practice, so knowing them and learning how to protect ourselves is essential.

Nevertheless, although we find it hard to believe, young people still prioritise personal encounters over digital ones. The major change is related to the first contact. Instead of taking place in a bar, or on the street, it takes place in a digital space (in the case of teenagers, usually via Instagram or Tik-Tok). Once the link is established, they move to the personal plane quite quickly.

### **What is the challenge ahead of us in relation to digital education?**

More education and less prohibition. Just as with the approach to sexuality, focusing on fears and dangers simply takes care of what is urgent while leaving out what is important. Therefore, the challenge is to take advantage of the opportunities that the digital age offers us, to emphasise the positive without denying the difficulties or problems that may arise, and to acquire tools to protect our privacy. And all this without forgetting the advantages of an analogue lifestyle.

### **What goals have you established for this course?**

The general goal is to learn how the Internet and the various types of digital relationships and communications are affecting the way teenagers express themselves, communicate and relate to each other using a different paradigm to the one we usually hear about in the media. We will primarily address sexual and erotic aspects with a view to minimising risks.