

## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

It is generally assumed that sexual satisfaction is an essential part of a successful relationship. Sex and relationship columns in the popular media often contain advice on how to spice up your sex life and improve your relationship in the process. However, does scientific research actually support this connection between satisfying sex and relationship happiness? This issue of *Check the Research* looks at studies on the association of sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, and discusses some of the factors shown to affect the interplay of these two conditions.

## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

### The Role of Communication

Canadian researcher Sandra Byers has studied the dynamic between sexual and relationship satisfaction. Her work has documented the importance of communication in relationships and the association of effective communication with increased levels of both sexual and relationship satisfaction. In one such study, Byers (2005) interviewed 87 participants twice, 18 months apart, about their relationship and sexual satisfaction. The aim of this longitudinal study was to focus on the experiences of individuals in relationships of longer than 12 months. The results confirmed past research showing that people who report relationship satisfaction also report sexual satisfaction. However, Byers points out that satisfaction in one of these two areas may not be directly impacted by satisfaction in the other because of confounding factors. One such factor could be communication. The study noted that over 18 months, individuals identified as good communicators experienced increases in both sexual and relationship satisfaction, while those who were poor communicators experienced decreases in both areas. The interplay between sexual and relationship satisfaction is complex and not necessarily one directional.

In a recent study, Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, and Gangamma (2013), examined the associations between couple communication, emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction among 335 heterosexual married couples. The average length of marriage for the couples in the study was 17 years. Yoo et al., viewed emotional and sexual intimacy as two distinct constructs. Using path analysis, sexual satisfaction was found to have a significant impact on emotional intimacy for both men and women while emotional intimacy did not have a significant impact on sexual satisfaction. Emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy were both fostered by positive forms of communication in a relationship, which in turn led to increased relationship satisfaction. One difference between men and women related to the factors that influenced relationship satisfaction was that husbands reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction when their wives reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction, while relationship satisfaction for wives was not necessarily associated with their husbands' sexual satisfaction. Yoo et al. speculate that this finding may be explained by the fact that men value their wife's sexual satisfaction as evidence of their skill as a sexual partner, while women view emotional intimacy as being a more important indicator of relationship success. However, for both men and women, a feeling of emotional and sexual intimacy with a partner led to greater relationship satisfaction.

**"SPOUSES WERE MORE LIKELY TO FEEL EMOTIONALLY AND SEXUALLY INTIMATE WITH THEIR PARTNERS WHEN THEY PERCEIVED THAT THEIR PARTNERS' COMMUNICATION STYLE WAS MORE POSITIVE, AND THEIR INCREASED INTIMACY, IN TURN, INCREASED THEIR RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION."**

(Yoo et al., 2013, *Discussion*, para.2.)



## Sexual Compatibility

Mark, Milhausen and Maitland (2013) looked at the relationship between perceived sexual compatibility and sexual and relationship satisfaction among 133 heterosexual couples in monogamous relationships recruited at a university in southwestern Ontario. Both partners from the couples completed separate online questionnaires that measured sexual satisfaction, perceived sexual compatibility, actual sexual compatibility, and arousability. The study found that greater sexual satisfaction was related to greater relationship satisfaction and that when one partner reported sexual and relationship satisfaction the other partner was likely to report the same. An interesting observation was that perceived sexual compatibility proved to be a stronger predictor of sexual and relationship satisfaction than actual compatibility, leading the authors to note that "...perceptions play a larger role in reality than reality itself" (Mark, et al. 2013, p. 209).

## Relationship Commitment

Researchers have also considered the interplay of perception and reality in relation to sexual and relationship satisfaction. In a study of over 3,400 participants, aged 18 to 26 years, Galinsky and Sonenstein (2013) explored the association between the perception of a partner's commitment to a relationship and reported levels of sexual enjoyment and relationship satisfaction. The study also measured levels of perceived relationship equity through the use of the following questions: "What do I get from the relationship?"; "What does my partner get from the relationship?"; "How much effort do I put into the relationship?"; and "How much effort does my partner put into the relationship?"

Galinsky and Sonenstein (2013) found that both men and women who reported higher levels of perceived relationship commitment also reported higher levels of sexual enjoyment. Perceived relationship equity was also positively associated with sexual enjoyment for both men and women. Women in the study were more likely to report decreased sexual enjoyment when they felt they were under-benefited, or investing more time and effort in the relationship than their partners, while men reported lower levels of sexual enjoyment when they felt they were over-benefited, or receiving more positive outcomes from the relationship than their partners. Equity theory notes that under-benefited individuals experience anger and frustration from their situation, in contrast to over-benefited individuals who tend to experience feelings of guilt.

**"...RESULTS SUGGEST THAT ANGER, FRUSTRATION, AND DEPRESSION ARE MORE LIKELY TO INTERFERE WITH YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUAL ENJOYMENT, WHILE GUILT IS MORE LIKELY TO INTERFERE WITH YOUNG MEN'S SEXUAL ENJOYMENT."**

(Galinsky & Sonenstein, 2013, p. 101)

Galinsky and Sonenstein (2013) suggest that their findings refute some of the commonly held assumptions about men and relationships, since men in their study were just as affected by perceived relationship commitment and equity as were women. The stereotype of the man who is more interested in sexual enjoyment than intimacy and commitment is not supported by this study.

## Motivation

Muise, Impett and Desmarais (2013) examined the differences in reported levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction when partners had sex for avoidance goals versus approach goals. Avoidance-motivated sex resulted when a partner had sex in order to avoid conflict, or engaged in sex out of guilt or a sense of duty. Approach-motivated sex was prompted by more positive goals, such as the desire for increased intimacy and physical pleasure. One phase of the study asked 108 dating couples (19- to-31 years-old) from a small Canadian university to keep a 14 day diary of their sexual encounters, including their motivation for having sex. Results showed that on the days when individuals engaged in sex for approach



motivated goals, both they and their partners reported higher levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction. Engaging in sex for approach motivated goals was also associated with higher levels of sexual desire for both partners.

Another phase of the Muise et al. (2013) study surveyed 44 heterosexual couples, 23- to- 60 years-old, in long-term relationships ranging from 3 to 39 years in duration. These couples completed a 21-day diary and noted their levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction as well as their motivation for sexual encounters. Findings from this study were similar to those from the previous study of 108 couples, with the added observation that avoidance goals were associated with lower levels of sexual desire for both partners. When these couples were followed up four months later, those who reported more episodes of avoidance-motivated sex over the course of the four months reported lower levels of sexual satisfaction and felt less committed to their partners.

**“TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE RESULTS SUGGEST THAT ALTHOUGH ENGAGING IN SEX PROVIDES DAILY BOOSTS TO SATISFACTION AND DESIRE COMPARED TO NOT ENGAGING IN SEX AT ALL, PURSUING SEX MORE FREQUENTLY FOR AVOIDANCE GOALS IS DETRIMENTAL TO SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT OVER TIME.”**

(Muise, Impett & Desmarais, 2013, p. 1328.)

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Research shows that sexual satisfaction is linked to relationship satisfaction and vice versa. However, there are various factors that influence this interaction. Positive communication between partners has been shown to increase both sexual and relationship satisfaction. Studies suggest that levels of emotional intimacy are associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction. Both men and women indicate that emotional and physical intimacy contribute to a successful relationship. As well, if both partners feel that their relationship is equitable and committed they report increased levels of sexual satisfaction. The motivation for sexual interaction also affects sexual and relationship satisfaction. Those who report positive reasons for having sex, such as to gain physical pleasure or increased intimacy with a partner, also report higher levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction as compared to those who are motivated by avoidance reasons such as feelings of guilt or to avoid conflict with a partner.

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