

couples physically and emotionally closer. In contrast, artless or absent communication about sex creates problems. For example, a racially diverse sample of married and committed same-sex couples, who had been in relationships for an average of 30 years, demonstrated that good communication contributed to psychological intimacy, which helped to create relationship satisfaction. A sense of equality in the relationship and expression of physical affection enhanced psychologically intimate communication, which was especially experienced by women in same-sex relationships.

Communication seems to be particularly important during disrupted or difficult relationship periods. A study of first-time parents found that good communication enhanced the quality of their intimate relationship and brought partners closer. When partners listened and laughed together as part of good communication and cohesion, the couple's sensuality (hugging, caressing) was increased, compensating for the temporary lower sexual satisfaction during this period of the couple's life. In contrast, a lack of intimate communication inhibits frequency of sexual activity and sexual satisfaction, specifically when there is a difference in the importance that each person assigns to communication. Greater differences between partners in the importance of intimate communication and use of direct strategies of approach may result in a greater likelihood of low sexual desire. Overall, good, intimate communication and direct initiation strategies send clear messages about one's wants and needs. This seems to lead to more satisfactory sexual outcomes. Disclosing sexual preferences to a partner is vital for sexual satisfaction over and above communication about nonsexual topics. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with communication is highly related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's sexual life.

There is a special issue regarding openness about sexual identity for gay and lesbian couples and how this affects their relationship and sexual satisfaction. A substantial literature on the subject suggests that when one or both partners in a same-sex relationship are uncommitted to a gay or lesbian identity, the happiness and sexual satisfaction of the couple suffers. If one person in the couple declines to be "out" while the other person does not hide his or her sexual identity, relationship satisfaction and sexual pleasure are negatively affected (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984).

To conclude, sexually active couples tend to be happier than couples who are not sexually active. Egalitarianism, affection, and intimate communication encourage more frequent and satisfying sexual relationships. Challenges, such as aging, poor health, or relationship issues may threaten sexual satisfaction, but overall all kinds of couples seem to be quite happy with their sexual lives together.

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WHAT SEXUAL SCIENTISTS KNOW ABOUT...

# SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS



A PUBLICATION OF  
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The importance of sexuality in couple's lives has been increasingly acknowledged by both researchers and the public in all Western and many non-Western countries. A growing multidisciplinary research literature explores how sexuality can enrich couple satisfaction and the purpose of this brief article is to summarize core findings.

### **Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction and Durability**

One of the most consistent research findings is that there is a positive relationship between sexual satisfaction and overall relationship satisfaction, commitment, and stability in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian relationships. Longitudinal studies of marriage have shown that spouses who are sexually content are more likely to be happy with their marriages and have reduced marital instability. Overall, sexual satisfaction seems to be related more strongly to relationship quality for men than women. Women are more likely than men to feel that a poor sex life is an unfortunate, but separate part of the couple's relationship. Men are more likely to feel that a poor sex life undermines the entire relationship. This gender difference is true in cohabiting and married couples and is also reflected in lesbian and gay male assessments of the importance of a good sex life.

Data, from the random U.S. sample generated by the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs) in 1994, provide information about population studies of sexual satisfaction (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Given the amount of critical comments made about the quality or frequency of sex in marriage and other committed relationships, the data support the idea of contented partners. A large majority (88%) of married individuals reported feeling extremely or very satisfied with their physical relationship and having feelings of love after engaging in sexual behaviors. Married respondents, especially those who were monogamous, reported the highest levels of sexual satisfaction, whereas cohabiting and dating couples reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction. Regardless of age, most individuals reported that they liked having sex with their partners. However, when comparing the degree of sexual pleasure experienced by married and unmarried people, women over 40

reported less physical pleasure than women who were younger. This finding has a number of possible interpretations. For instance, perimenopause or menopause may be starting or in full swing for the older women and involve hormonal fluctuations and sexual changes, including uncomfortable rises in temperature, difficulty sleeping, and lack of adequate vaginal lubrication. Husbands may not be attuned to their wives changing needs and may not know how to adjust to help make sex more satisfying for their wives. The "youth" focus in our culture may also influence people to regard aging women as less sexually desirable and desirous, and older women may absorb these cultural categorizations and feel inadequate or unattractive. Male partners may be having sexual issues of their own, such as erectile dysfunction, and initiate intercourse less, or not at all. Less frequent intercourse or intercourse with a penis that is no longer very hard may affect female satisfaction.

The NHSLs did find that age was related to the sexual satisfaction of men as well. Younger men were more likely than men over 40 to report very high levels of sexual pleasure. Again various factors may influence this age difference in sexual satisfaction. For example, men over 40 have more difficulties with occasional or continuing erectile dysfunction, and prostate problems become more common with age. Overall health, more likely to be compromised as men age, might also be implicated and conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure may affect performance and also modify sexual enjoyment. In addition, relationship issues are more likely over time, and habituated behavior may make sex less rewarding. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), in their study *American Couples: Money, Work, and Sex*, found an overall loss of satisfaction in American couples as relationships aged, and in an Australian study, Richters, Grulich, de Visser, Smith, and Rissel (2003) found that women's levels of high sexual satisfaction declined more than men's in the first 5 years of being together.

The type of relationship a person is in needs to be considered when examining sexual satisfaction. In a study of over 19,000 Australian men and women, sexual satisfaction across three types of relationships—heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual—varied. The majority of men (90%) and women (79%)

in heterosexual relationships described sex as very or extremely physically satisfying. Similarly the majority of these men (88%) and women (79%) described their sexual life as emotionally satisfying as well. Women in heterosexual relationships who identified as bisexuals were no less likely than heterosexually identified women to report the sex in their relationships as physically satisfying, but they were less likely to report extreme emotional satisfaction.

The majority of men in homosexual relationships described sex as physically and emotionally satisfying (86% and 85%, respectively). In comparison, lesbians had significantly higher physical and emotional satisfaction than heterosexual women (93% and 89%, respectively).

### **Emotions, Relationship Quality, and Sexual Satisfaction**

Overall marital satisfaction is intimately related to sexual satisfaction and sexual satisfaction is directly and indirectly related to marital closeness. Couples with a greater frequency of affectionate sexual behavior do, in general, experience increased sexual and emotional satisfaction, fewer sexual concerns and difficulties, and greater relationship satisfaction. Couples who indicate more zest, communication intimacy, and overall couple satisfaction, report more frequent and satisfying sexual experiences. There are some gender differences and similarities. For example, heterosexual women's sexual satisfaction seems to be correlated more strongly with relationship satisfaction than the sexual satisfaction of their male partners. Yet men also identify emotional intimacy as an important element of sexual satisfaction. In fact, research on gay and heterosexual men over age 50 suggests that relationship factors can be a key element of men's sexual enjoyment.

For most men and women, the quality and quantity of sex in a committed relationship is associated with feelings of love for one's spouse or partner. In a study of almost 1,000 ethnically diverse married women and men, aged 20-60, living in the United States, Young, Denny, Luquis, and Young (1998) found that 60% of the variation in their sexual satisfaction was explained by the following factors (in order of importance):

overall satisfaction with the marriage, nonsexual aspects of the relationship, frequency of one's own and one's partner's orgasm, frequency of sexual activity, and fewer inhibitions, including a willingness to participate in a variety of noncoital sexual activities. The investigators emphasized that general quality of the relationship, coupled with emotional closeness, is critically important to sexual satisfaction.

Other researchers have found that egalitarianism—an ideological or practical commitment to equal power, decision making, division of household tasks and status in a relationship—seems to relate strongly to sexual satisfaction. For example, in a survey of 5,000 couples, the best predictors of wives' overall marital satisfaction were satisfaction with the husbands' degree of love, affection, and understanding and an equitable division of household tasks. In another study of 57 racially diverse heterosexual couples, who were married on average of 7 years, higher egalitarianism significantly predicted higher sexual desire for both sexes. However, egalitarianism has also been associated with occasional boredom and a kind of sibling-like friendship in couples' relationships that could undermine their passionate sexual desire. This is why some clinicians and researchers suggest that introducing more distance and difference, rather than connection and similarity, helps to resurrect passion in long-term stable relationships. Increasing distance and autonomy may offer new opportunities to increase mystery through new unshared experiences. It may not be the level of intimacy per se, but *rapidly* changing intimacy that is associated with increased passion. An obvious time of rapidly increasing intimacy is at the beginning of romantic love. But couples also often report greater passion when they are feeling romantic jealousy or when there is some other threat to the relationship, rather than when emotions are most stable.

### **Communication and Sexual Satisfaction**

Therapists and relationship researchers talk about the importance of good communication in relationships. They know that communication is important in every aspect of couples' lives. Research does show that good communication significantly contributes to relationship and sexual satisfaction and helps bring