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 sexual outcomes. Disclosing sexual preferences to a partner is vital for sexual satisfaction over and above sexual outcomes.

To conclude, sexually active couples tend to be happier than couples who are not sexually active. Egaliitarianism, 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.

References & Recommended Readings


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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 on sexual satisfaction. Gagnon, Laumann, Gagnon, Michaels, & Michaels, 1994). 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 non-erectile impotence and prostate problems. These factors 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 indirectly 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: Men, Women, and Work, found that all 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 American 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 satisfaction 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 (88% and 89%, respectively), whereas cohabiting and dating relationships 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 the highest, commensurate 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 bisexual 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. A study of about 1,000 ethnically diverse married women and men aged 20-60, living in the United States, Young, Denny, Luxe, 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 a relationship that facilitates their ability 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 relationships has a positive relationship with sexual satisfaction. For example, in a survey of 5,000 couples, the best predictors of wives' overall marital satisfaction were the husbands' degree of love, affection, and understanding and an equitable division of household tasks. In a 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 a healthy relationship may also be the one that, 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 somewhat 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